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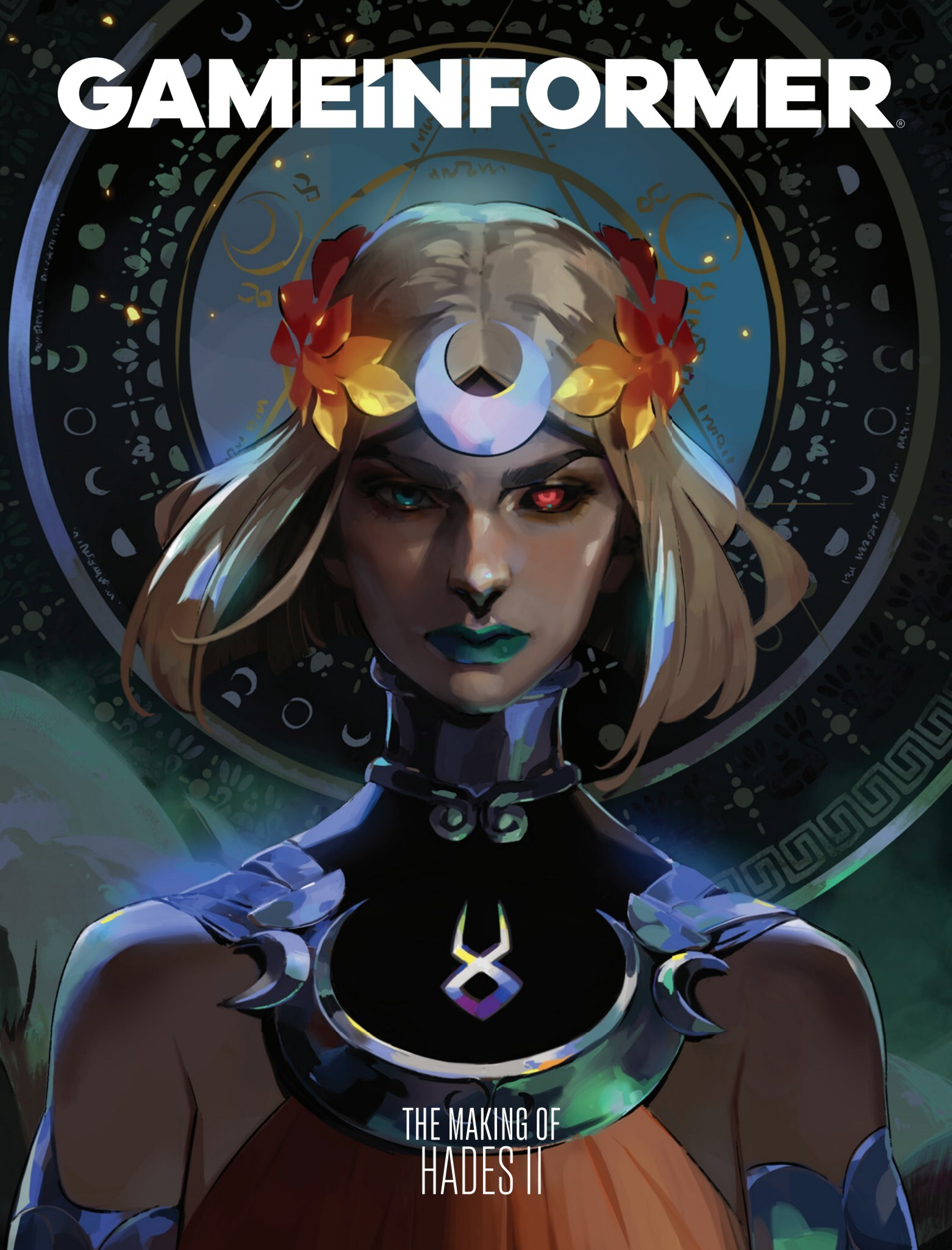

THE MAKING OF
HADES II

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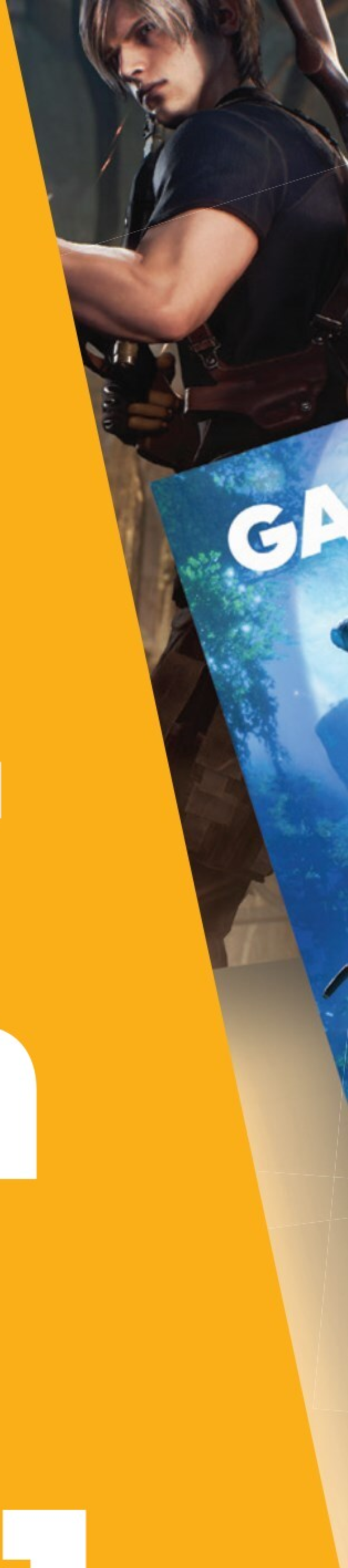

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EDITOR'S NOTE

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

I ALWAYS LOOK FORWARD to the roll-out of a new issue and the opportunity to share what we've been working on with all of you. But I have to admit to a particular level of personal excitement this time because of two special features in this month's issue.

We're thrilled to feature Supergiant Games' Hades II as our big cover story this month. I've been a fan of the studio's output ever since the 2011 release of Bastion. Few development houses have such a cohesive and consistent style, a knack for storytelling, and a flair for creative gameplay; I've hoped for years to feature the developer's work in a bigger way in *Game Informer*.

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

We worked hard in our conversations with Supergiant to make sure the story we had to share would enrich and enhance time spent with Hades II through a deep understanding of how the game was made, the ways it differs from its wildly successful predecessor, and hopefully make it more rewarding to follow along with the game's road to full release. If you share our fondness for the original Hades and you're eager to see how the follow-up is shaping up, I hope this story adds to the fun and gives a peek into the mindsets of this innovative team.

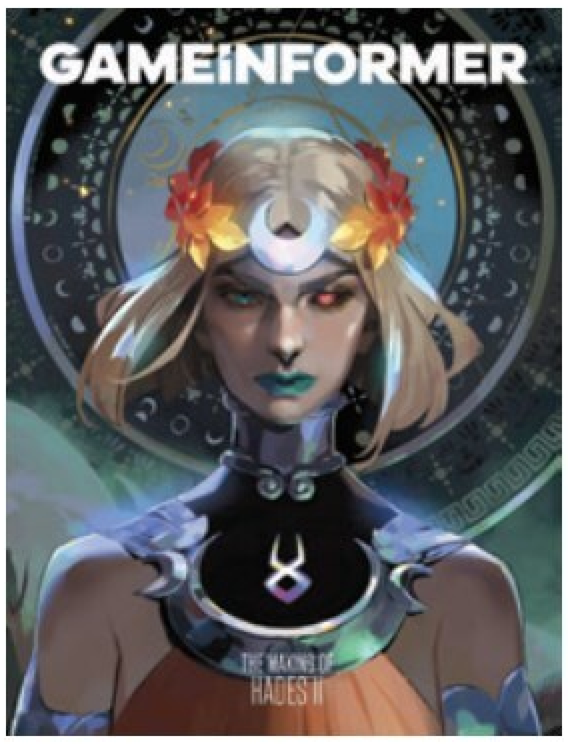
As excited as I am about Hades II, I'm also stoked about this issue's deep dive into the future of the Dungeons & Dragons tabletop game. I'd argue there's no single game as influential to the nature of games across all mediums, and it's hard to believe it's now been part of the gaming landscape for 50 years.

We've had an unofficial series of articles in recent months to help highlight that 50th anniversary. That started with Shannon Liao's piece a couple of months back about how D&D has been a foundational inspiration for many working in video games. Last month, our product coverage highlighted some great items for lovers of the D&D game.

To top it off, I had the good fortune this month to visit the Wizards of the Coast headquarters and speak with its designers for a blowout look at the new revision of Dungeons & Dragons, which begins to roll out later this year. Whether you're a longtime player or a newcomer, thanks to recent releases like Baldur's Gate 3 or the D&D movie that made you curious, I think you'll be excited by what's on the way.

There's so much more to mention about this stacked issue, but I'll leave the rest for you to discover as you page through. Thanks for joining us, and I hope you enjoy what we have to share.

Play well. Be well.



HADES II

"The sorcerous Melinoë gazes with intensity toward her goal – and the audience!" says cover artist and Supergiant art director Jen Zee. "She's determined, focused, and powerful. Hecate, Melinoë's mentor, can be seen in the distance wielding her torches and gazing toward the moon. Standing on the precipice of the Crossroads with back turned, she is flanked by her trusty familiars, a hound and a polecat."

GAMEINFORMER

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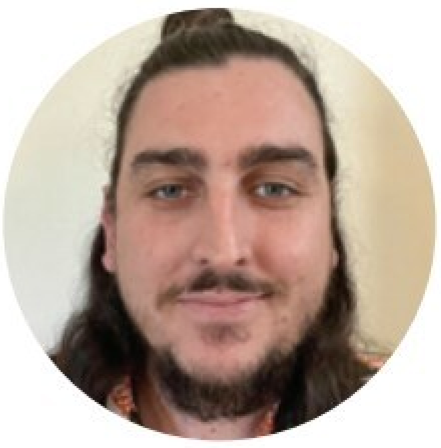
STAFF SPOTLIGHT



Wesley LeBlanc

Associate Editor

Now that Hollywood has (seemingly) found the winning formula for adapting our favorite games, I'm hoping the pendulum starts swinging in a new direction: books into games. Perhaps it's my love of reading I've rediscovered over the last year, but I constantly visualize whatever I'm reading as a game. Even beyond more obvious choices like the upcoming Dune: Awakening, adapt some Stephen King horrors, turn TikTok's favorite dragon book "Fourth Wing" into an RPG, and give me a walking sim based on any Haruki Murakami story. It feels like books are the next bastion of adaptation, and I can't wait.

Jon Woodey

Web Designer & Programmer

Lately I've been wondering just how in-tune I am with my fellow gamers. This has been brought on largely due to Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail's release on the horizon and hearing all the discourse surrounding the expansion. I'm sure the diversity of opinion is exacerbated by the fact the game is an MMORPG, but it did get me thinking: how well do we know our favorite game's community? It's easy to think that our own finger has the most accurate reading on the pulse of the games we play, but is that true? Food for thought.

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Supergiant Games is making its first sequel, and we visited the developer in California to find out why it wasn't quite ready to escape Hell and move on. We played the game extensively, spoke with the team about bringing the follow-up to life, looked ahead to the game's future, and lots more. If you're playing Hades II in Early Access, consider our cover story the perfect companion piece

10 THE FUTURE OF DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

We visited Wizards of the Coast to learn about why Dungeons & Dragons is experiencing a pop culture moment, and learn what is in store for the future

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Digital Eclipse is doing something different by creating interactive museum pieces about the medium's history. We spoke with the team about the how and, importantly, why of what it is doing

50 PUTTING THE SEOUL IN CONSOLE

The South Korean video game scene is experiencing a small renaissance in 2024 and we visited the country to get our hands on its next big shooter, The First Descendant

78 THE CONTINUING LEGACY OF FINAL FANTASY XI

There exists a community that is keeping Square Enix's first MMO, Final Fantasy XI, alive, and we spoke with its players about why the game was, and continues to be, special

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Replies

YOU'RE TOO KIND!

I just want to say that I'm thrilled with the new print subscription being easier than ever before. I've been a subscriber to *G.I.* since, well, before I could even read, begging my parents to look at all the cool photos. I have every issue I've ever gotten and treasure them like the great works they are. Not only has the print edition been wonderful but I'm also consistently amazed at the quality of work put into videos and podcasts. I've listened to the podcast since the Matt Helgeson days and remember viewing videos since the Twisted Metal episode of Replay (My *G.I.*-signed Sonic '06 is among my most prized possessions). No matter the makeup of the staff, *G.I.* constantly puts out incredible work by clearly very passionate people. I can't wait to see what the coming years of *G.I.* bring, and I just wanted to say to keep up all the fantastic work all of you do! **– gerrbear11 via email**

↳ *A couple of issues ago, we recommended that you tell those who create games and content you love that you love it because it will mean more to them than you know. That same principle applies here. Wow! Thank you so much for reading, watching, and listening to our content for such a sustained stretch! And yes! We're super excited for our revamped print subscription, as well (available at Subscription.GameInformer.com). We're hoping it helps more people be able to enjoy our content the way they prefer!*

HERE FOR A QUICK TIME, NOT A LONG TIME

I'm wondering what happened to QTEs? I actually enjoyed them. It was one my favorite things about the early GOW games. Watching the big attack scenes is great but it's even better when you get to control it a little. I guess I'm also wondering how many out there enjoyed them as well? **– Logan via email**

↳ *Quick time events (or QTEs) rose to prominence with games like Shenmue, Resident Evil 4, and God of War in the early 2000s, and were seen as extremely novel at the time. The core concept was it allowed you to control your character during what would have otherwise been a cutscene. The interactivity of an otherwise non-gameplay moment was a big selling point for some games. However, with advancing technology and the overuse of the QTE convention, they largely fell out of favor with gamers.*

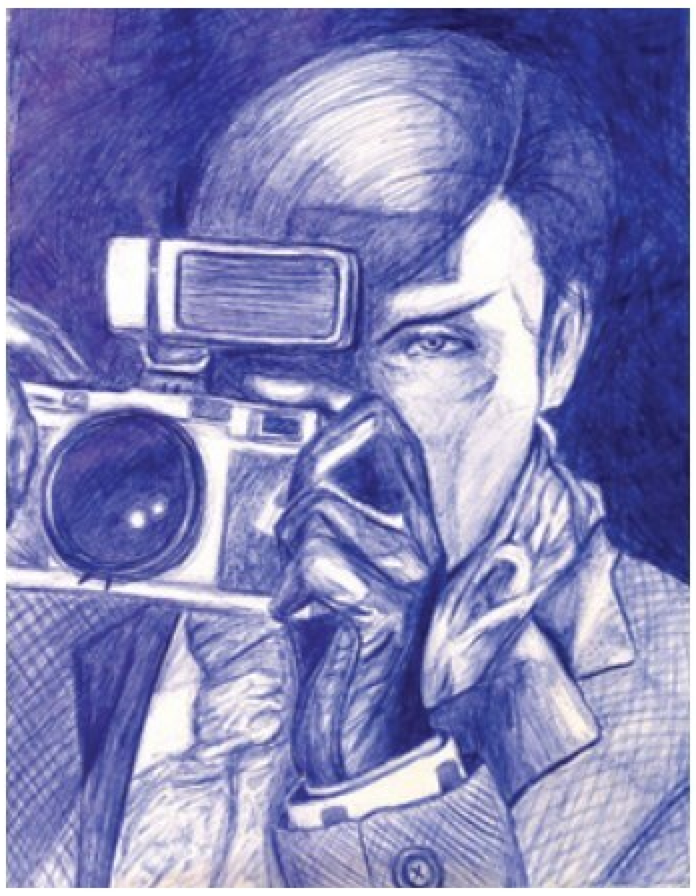
Today, it almost feels like we're past the point of needing to rely so heavily on QTEs. Yes, it can still be fun to pull off a brutal finishing move or an acrobatic maneuver you couldn't otherwise make through gameplay, but a lot of players don't love the feeling of the most impactful gameplay moments being relegated to what essentially equates to an interactive movie. Another downside to QTEs is they cover the screen with button prompts when you're trying to watch your character perform visually impressive moves. On the other hand, at least the presence of QTEs stopped us from immediately picking up our phones as soon as cutscenes start.

LET'S GET PHYSICAL

With recent events, such as the shutdown of certain online services which could include access to specific games, there's a real danger that some games, or features/DLC, could be lost forever after it was released as digital-only content. Are physical games now more important than ever? **– Karm via Instagram**

↳ *The recent closure of the Wii U and 3DS eShops has reignited the conversation surrounding game preservation and what it truly means to own something digitally. While you can still download eShop titles you already own for the time being, Nintendo only assures players that will be the case "for the foreseeable future." In an increasingly digital age, it's disheartening, albeit understandable, to see these shops and services close.*

From a game preservation perspective, physical discs and cartridges have always been the better path to ensuring you have access to your games. So many games are delisted – sometimes without warning – and if it doesn't exist in physical form, there is no way to purchase them after they vanish from digital storefronts. But buying physical isn't a magic fix-all in 2024; so many games in this day and age require an online connection or hefty patches to work at all, making it slightly different than collecting physical music CDs or Blu-rays. Even if you own those kinds of games physically, you're not going to be greeted by anything more than an error message telling you that you need to be connected to the servers in order to play.



Reader art submission: Polina

Soundoff: Your Character Creation Strategies

We asked our readers and community what their go-to strategy is when creating a character. Here are some of their responses!

I just try to make someone look like me or how I'd want to look in that universe, then change their features to match their story, character, and stat build. **– Ace via Twitter**

If I can create me, I will try to recreate a version of myself but in some games you will never see how your character looks in-game (like in Skyrim, for example). For those games I just pick presets. **– Ahnaf via Facebook**

I usually try to make a character that looks like me (Mass Effect games for example). It really helps make the game a more immersive gaming experience. **– Kyle via Instagram**

Make them look sillier than my reflection in a chrome spork. **– JD via Instagram**

Usually try and create a backstory and personality based on and around what I know about the game world and its lore. **– Dwight via Instagram**

For the first playthrough, I made the character based on myself. For the second, third, and ... playthroughs I make them based on imaginary people in my head. **– Tanaz via Instagram**

Join the conversation

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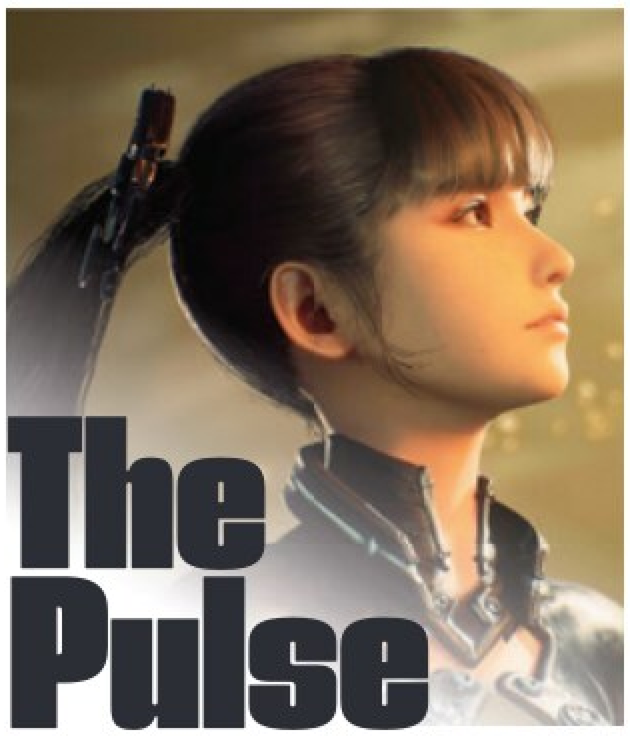
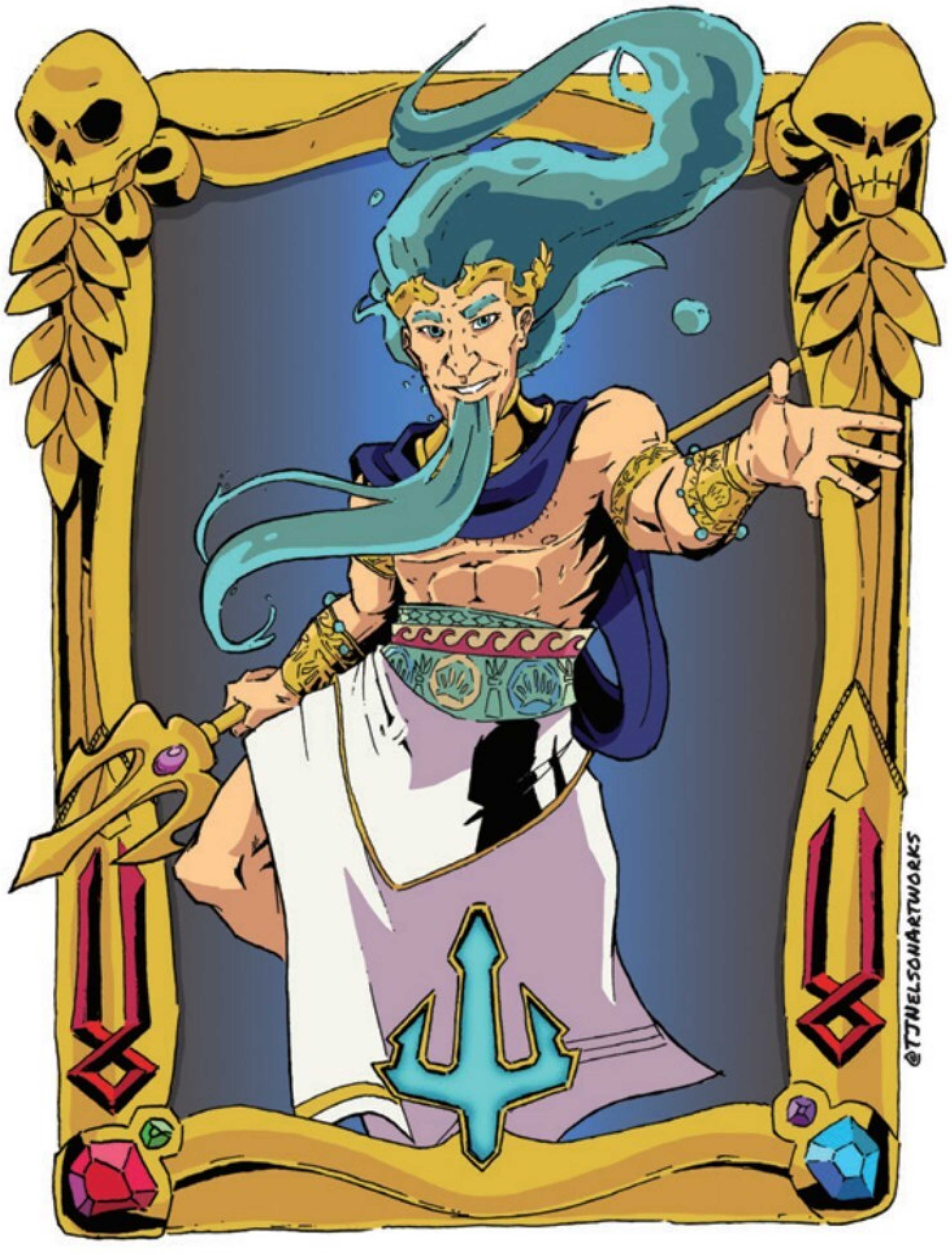


The Pulse

We asked the community what they've been playing over the last month and have compiled power rankings of the current hottest games among our readers.

1. Stellar Blade NEW RELEASE
2. Fallout 4 ▲
3. Final Fantasy VII Rebirth ▼
4. Helldivers 2 ▼
5. Red Dead Redemption 2 ▲
6. Fallout: New Vegas ▲
7. Rise of the Rōnin ▼
8. Persona 3 Reload ▲
9. Star Wars Jedi: Survivor ▲
10. Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door NEW RELEASE



Reader art submission: Tyler Nelson

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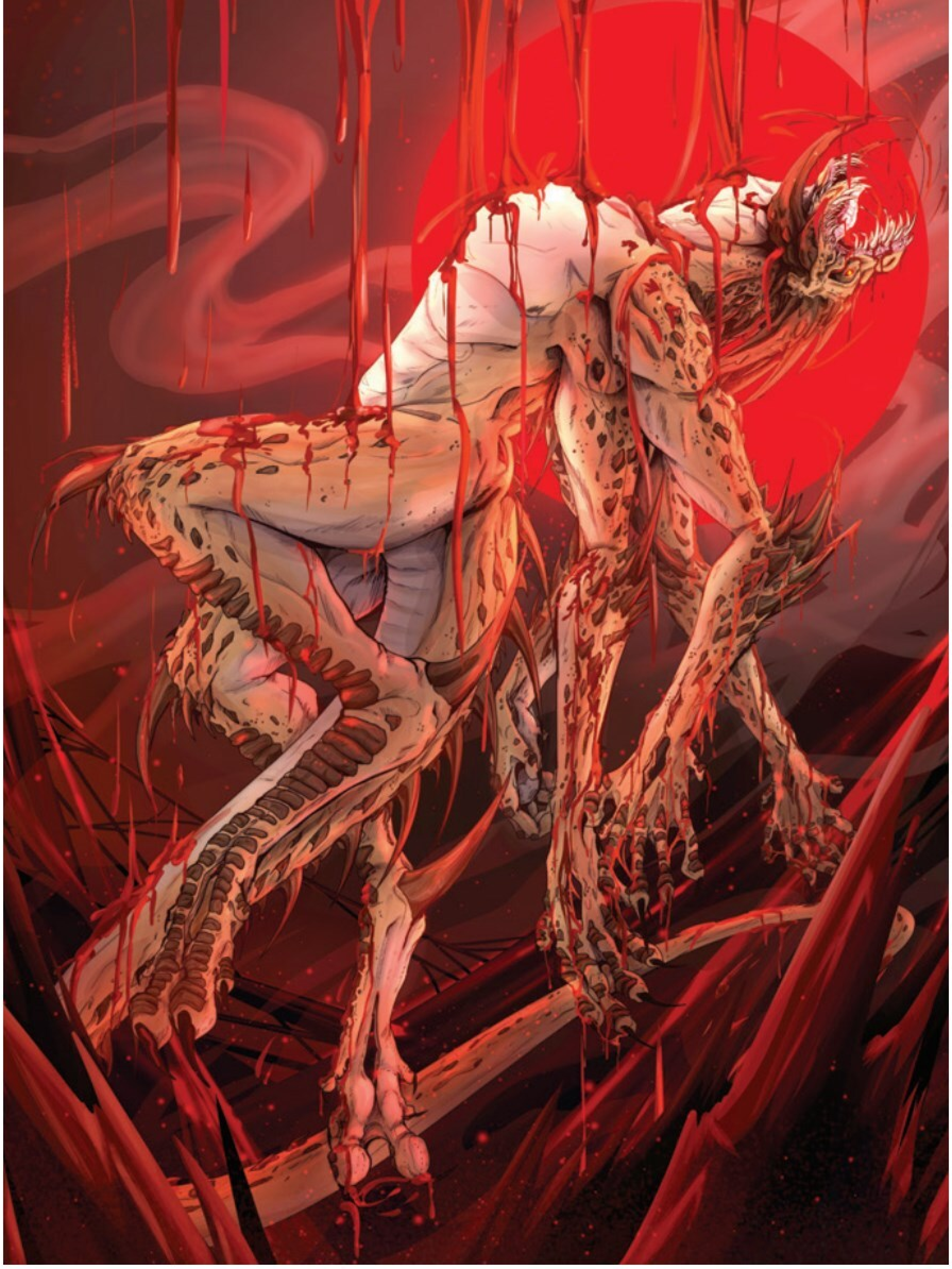
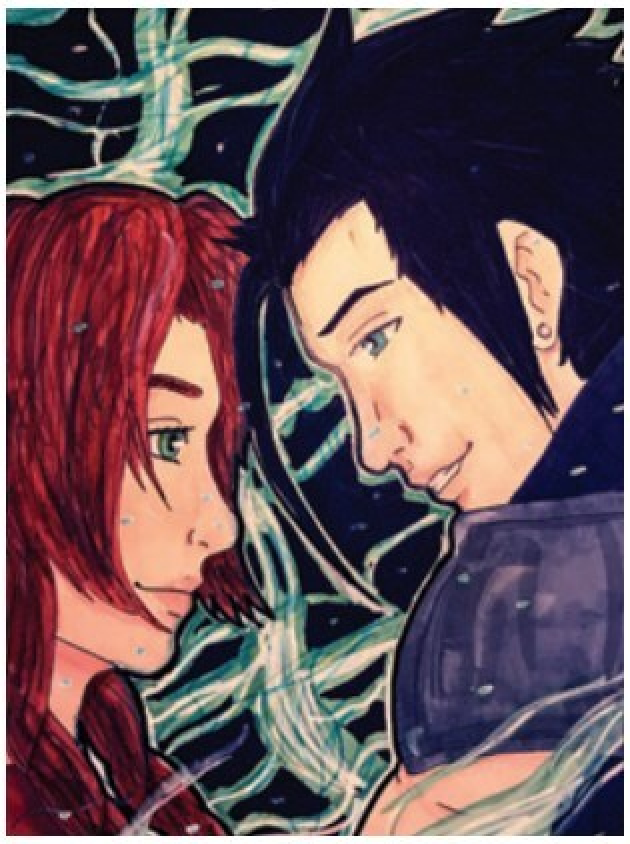


Reader art winner: Alex Rougeux

Reader art submission: Aaron H.

Reader art submission:
Dale Taylor, age 13

Reader art submission:
Melanie Herndon



Reader art submission:
Gwen Leonard, age 13

XBOX TO GO?

I keep hearing rumors about Microsoft secretly developing an Xbox handheld to compete with the Steam Deck and Nintendo Switch. What are your thoughts on a potential Xbox Mini replacing the Series X in the next few years? If Microsoft can one-up the PlayStation Portal by making theirs a true standalone handheld, I'll be a very happy camper! Sign me up for that right now!!!
– O.G. (Original Gamer) via email

↳ *Rumors have been swirling for a while now that Xbox might be trying to do its own twist on what the Switch has accomplished over the last seven years, and those whispers are starting to intensify. In a December interview with* Windows Central*, Xbox CEO Phil Spencer spoke glowingly about existing handheld PC gaming systems on the market. Then, this past March, Spencer again spoke about his love of handheld gaming platforms in an interview with* Polygon*. In that interview, Spencer also mentioned that the hardware team is looking at ways to "allow people to play at times when they couldn't go play [in the past]."*

The rumors came to a head a month later in April, when Xbox sent out a survey asking about players' handheld gaming habits and if they would consider buying a new handheld gaming device in the coming years. While there hasn't been any kind of announcement as of this writing, all signs seem to point toward Xbox, at the very least, exploring the idea of a handheld gaming device. As for the question of whether it will replace the Series X, we doubt Xbox would completely exit the high-end console market, but perhaps a less powerful hybrid console could replace the lower-end Series S in Xbox's catalog. Again, it's all informed speculation at this point, but with Nintendo paving the way for hybrid consoles, PlayStation once again dipping its toes in the handheld gaming pool with the streaming-based Portal, and various PC-based handheld systems currently available, Xbox almost feels behind the curve at this point.

CONNECT / DISCONNECT

1

STAR WARS
OUTLAWS

2

SUPERGIANT
NUJABES

3

4

THE FIRST
DESCENDANT

5

GI SPY

Each month, we attend events and visit developers to get the latest information on the hottest games. Check out some of our latest photos from around the video game industry.

1.

While at PAX East in Boston, Massachusetts, Alex reunited with his old podcast pals: *Kotaku*'s Moises Taveras and *Kinda Funny*'s Blessing Adeoye Jr.

2.

In case you missed our exclusive coverage hub from the last issue, you can learn even more about Star Wars Outlaws from our visit to Massive Entertainment in Malmö, Sweden at GameInformer.com/StarWarsOutlaws

3.

This month, Marcus and Alex traveled to San Francisco, California, to visit Supergiant Games to dive into the details of one of the most anticipated indie games of all time, Hades II. You can learn all we learned in this issue's cover story on p. 38

4.

Matt flew out to Seattle, Washington, to visit Dungeons & Dragons and Magic: The Gathering publisher Wizards of the Coast and was evidently nearly taken out by a giant dragon. You can read all about the future of D&D on p. 10

5.

Wesley flew to Seoul, South Korea, to visit Nexon and chat with producer Beomjun Lee about The First Descendant, and you can read more about that trip and the game on p. 50 ■

↙
Artist Credit:
Billy Christian

THE FUTURE *of* DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

A deep dive into *the new books* that will *define* the game

BY MATT MILLER

THE MAKERS OF D&D HAVE A SECRET door that obscures a hidden room. Explore the corridors of their new headquarters and an unassuming rulebook on a bookshelf can be manipulated to reveal the covert entrance. Inside, the hidden chamber houses treasures – walls of detailed miniatures, mounted dragon heads, and luxurious seating around a grand table, suitable for playing out similarly grand adventures. Even so, the furnishing is incomplete, not yet ready to host a whole party of visiting adventurers. I'm allowed only a short visit.

Wizards of the Coast has been preparing a revision and update to the Dungeons & Dragons game for years. Fully compatible with the popular 5th edition of the game that has captivated tabletop players for the last decade, it begs the question of why new versions are required. After a day of exploring the ins and outs of the newly revised books and speaking with its developers, I have the answer. Like the hidden room in their offices, this new version of the game may not yet be complete. But once you have a good look, it leaves little doubt about the treasures – and fun – that await inside.

Changing Times

It's been a tumultuous period for the D&D brand. Wizards of the Coast has weathered some high-profile challenges in recent months, including disagreements with fans and other publishers over licensing issues, print problems around a big release, and most recently, the departure of division president Cynthia Williams.

At the same time, Dungeons & Dragons continues to enjoy unprecedented popularity. The 2023 movie was received well by critics and fans, the online streaming movement around the game continues unabated, and the recent release of Baldur's Gate 3 proved to be one of the most celebrated video games of the last decade.

In the wake of that tumult, the design team working on D&D has continued quietly sculpting the next evolution of the game. After decades of new "editions" that fundamentally reworked the way the game is played, virtually everyone with any connection with D&D seems to recognize the current 5th edition, released in 2014, is well-loved and in no need of replacement.

Nonetheless, 10 years of design advancement, experimentation, and feedback have brought to light countless opportunities to enrich, improve, and advance the game. "It's really about just taking stock of all the lessons we've learned over the past decade, all the conversations we've had with each other and with our fans," says creative director Chris Perkins. "And getting these books to be the best first entry into the game as possible."

Before visiting Wizards of the Coast, I incorrectly surmised that plans for a game revision might be mostly surface-level or about repackaging existing content. After a day of looking over the books, talking to the artists and designers, and learning about the content planned for each new core book, it's clear that the books are far more than new window-dressing. After playing D&D for nearly 40 years, these new books represent the version of the game I strongly suspect I'll want to play at my table.

Each art image for a character's background helps to provide a sense of place and origin, like this one for the sailor

Artist Credit: Noor Rahman

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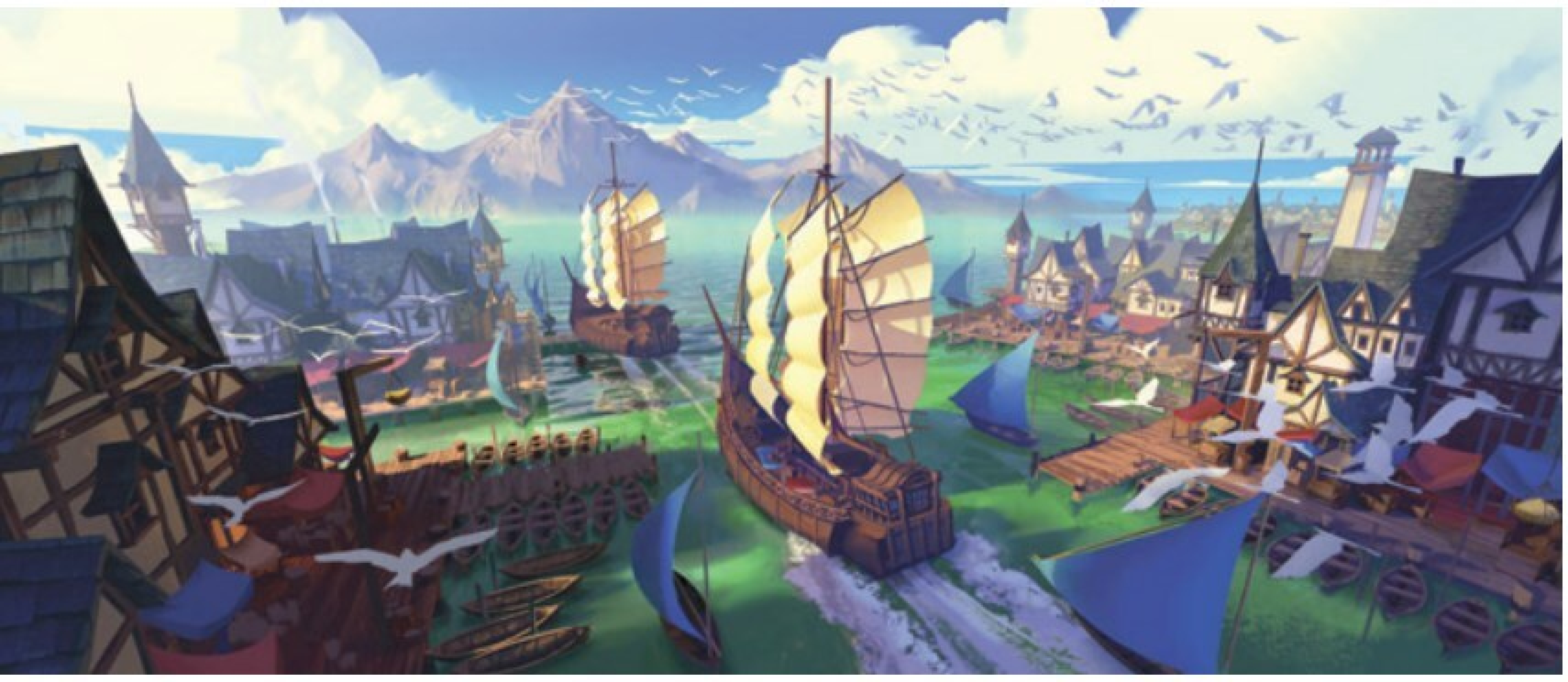


New Approaches

Perhaps it's a presumptuous statement, especially when I've seen only snippets of the final game. I'm not pre-judging; there's no doubt that much remains undetailed about this new revision to D&D, and I'm eager to put the final version through its paces. But my sunny prediction isn't without evidence.

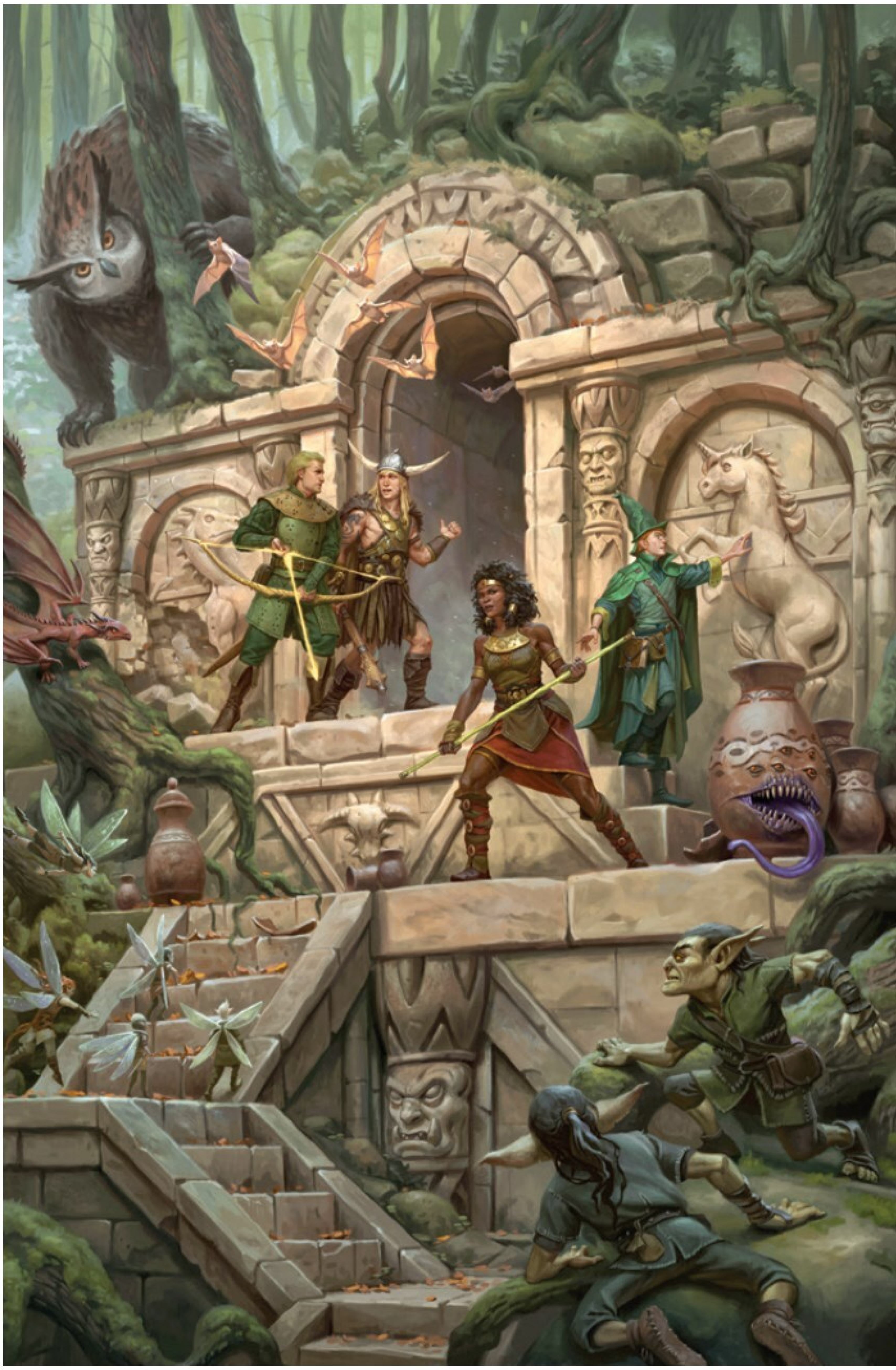
"This is the first time in D&D's history that the lead designers of one set of the core books are the same leads doing the next round of core books," says game director Jeremy Crawford. "Although this time we have a new friend joining us because Chris Perkins, James Wyatt, and I were the leads on the three core books a decade ago, and this time, it's the three of us, joined by Wes Schneider."

"Because we are getting to revisit our own work, we are able to flesh things out in a way that I think has never been possible before," Crawford continues. "Because we can look at what we did a decade ago and know exactly why we did it, and know what is really at the heart of it. We know how to preserve that heart, but it also means we know which parts are changeable."

The D&D design team seems not just accepting but enthusiastic about players continuing to reference the breadth of 5th edition books released over the years.

The value proposition for the revised core books is about the wealth of added content, better-organized presentation, reworks of systems like classes and backgrounds, the introduction of player bastions and weapon masteries, a bevy of new monsters and spells, and the bounty of fleshed-out fiction for the D&D multiverse. It's also the art-forward and visually stunning approach that brings the new books to life. Each of the three books – Player's Handbook, Dungeon Master's Guide, and Monster Manual – number 384 pages, and the amount of included art to ignite one's imagination is impressive.

← Artist Credit: Luca Bancone

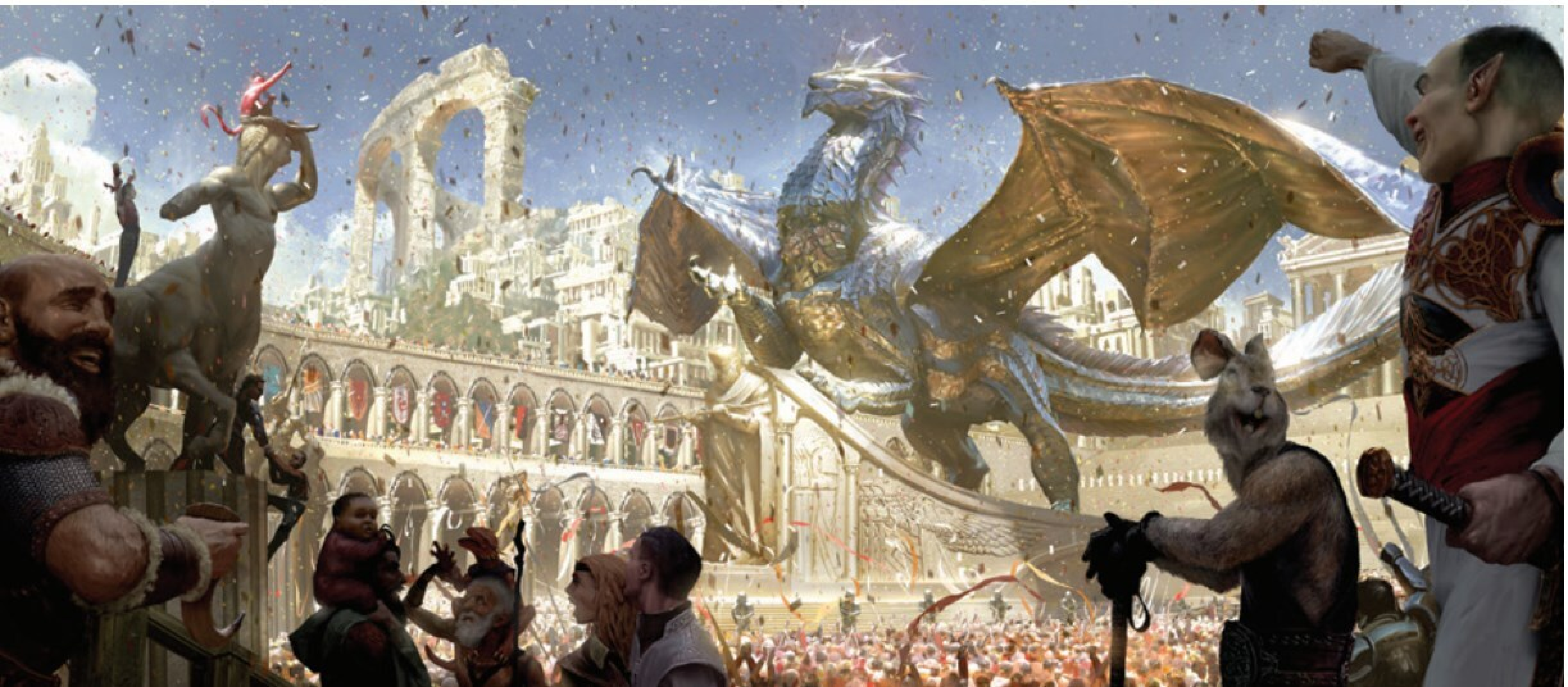


A Picture's Worth

From its inception, D&D has relied on art to bring its fantastical settings to life and give players and Dungeon Masters fertile ground to grow their own stories. "There is a sumptuousness to the new books that is really thrilling, because people are going to simply just get to see aspects of D&D that they've never seen before," Crawford says.

With the revised releases, from covers to stunning interior art, that goal has never been more apparent. There's a stated intent to help D&D players contextualize and understand the content they're reading and bring the manifold worlds of the D&D multiverse to the forefront.

Far more than in prior releases, the art of the new books highlights the characters that helped popularize the game in comics, cartoons, novels, and all the far-flung campaign settings established over decades. Newcomers might not recognize Raistlin and Caramon Majere battling against a wyvern or Bobby the Barbarian from the old Saturday morning cartoon, now all grown up, towering over his friends as they explore an ancient ruin – but for many, it will elicit a big smile.



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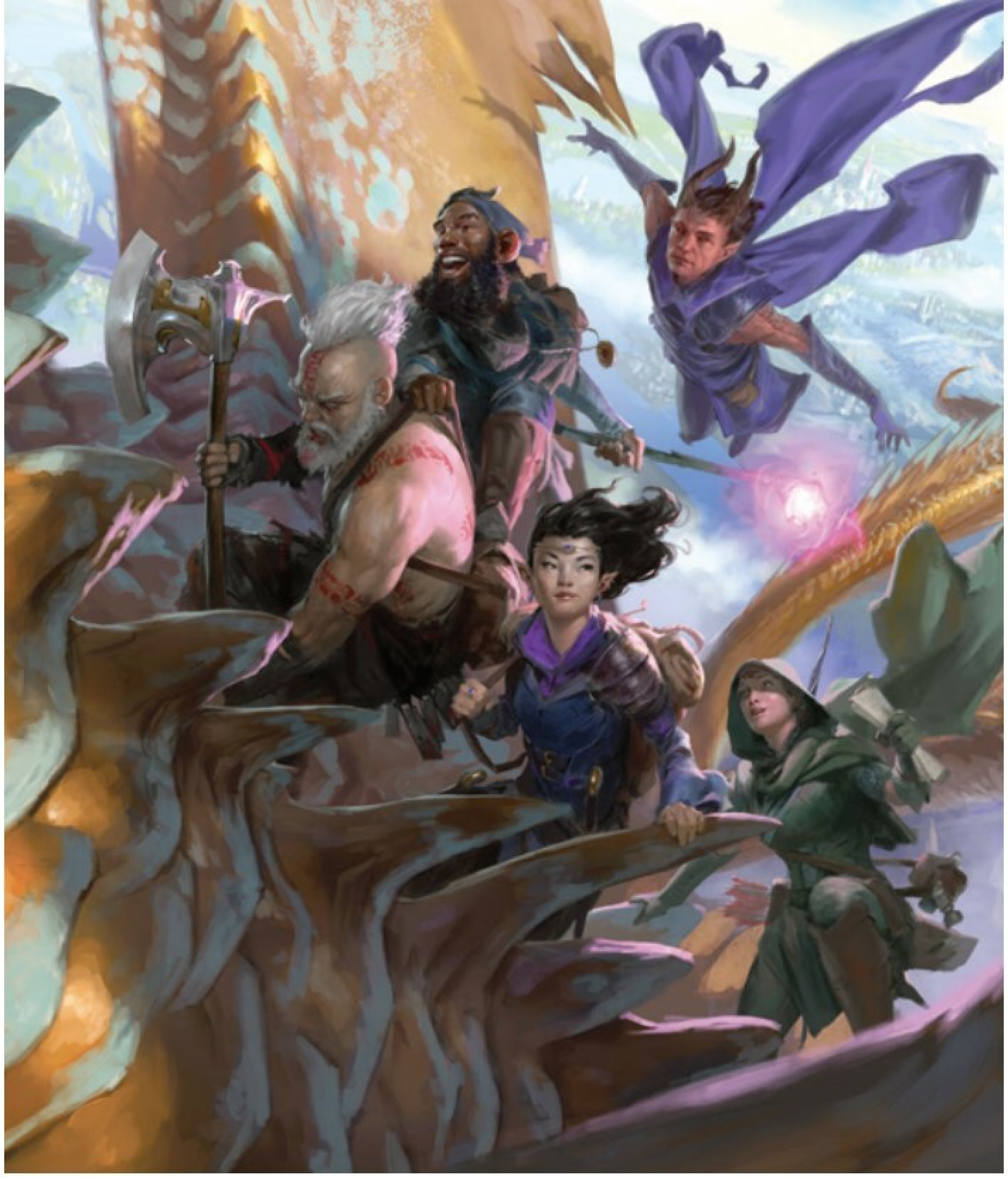
Each chapter of the Player's Handbook opens with illustrations drawn from the legends and heroes of D&D fiction

Artist Credit: Dmitry Burmak

↘

Artist Credit: Campbell White



↓
The rear cover of the Player's Handbook features this party of unknown adventurers on the back of a bronze dragon

Artist Credit: Tyler Jacobson

Even if you don't recognize those names, this new revision of D&D revels in the history and mythology of the game, helping the books feel rooted in legends that have been discussed and debated around gaming tables for decades. Every chapter opening of the Player's Handbook depicts mythical figures from across the fiction.

At the same time, other pieces of art guide your imagination to new places and creations. The sprawling Class chapter of the Player's Handbook features over 60 illustrations – including one big page-filling iconic representation of each of 12 core classes and 48 additional pieces for the four subclasses under each. "It's almost like a character select screen," says studio art director Josh Herman. "As players go through this, they see a ton of characters. And hopefully, in going through 60 of them, they'll see one or even a handful that they're interested in – that they want to play."

In the Backgrounds section, each features environment art to evoke a sense of place to your character's history. "We wanted the background art to literally be a background that you could imagine your character in," Crawford says.

For each species, we see groups from each category enmeshed in the culture of their people. Individual weapons are pictured as you peruse equipment; no more wondering about the difference between a glaive and a halberd. Spells are frequently illustrated in the midst of being cast. Monsters are seen deploying the attacks they're most known for in the settings where you'd find them. Everything is presented to increase immersion and ease understanding.

For the Players

The new Player's Handbook is strongly rooted in useability. Eschewing earlier versions that launched directly into character creation, the robust opening chapter is all about playing the game, filled with examples and footnotes explaining what is happening. The book references an included rules glossary, with quick explanations of rules around cover, jumping, being prone, and anything else that might have once been hard to find. The shared goal is to welcome new players with approachable introductions and offer instant access and explanations to experienced players.

The subsequent dive into character creation takes up a big part of the book, but based on what I saw, it's simultaneously easier than ever to craft something quickly while still giving flexibility to those who prefer to manage each facet of their character's build. For instance, a table offers a full ability score array for every class in the game for players who want to move past and confidently lock in good choices quickly, but there's also the option to tweak or roll as desired.

All 12 core classes have returned, from Warlock and Wizard to Cleric and Rogue, each with four distinct subclasses. Three of these subclasses are brand new, while many more have been so heavily redesigned that they are effectively new. Perhaps more than anywhere, classes and subclasses have benefited from extensive playtesting over recent years with the D&D playerbase, and the designers are especially proud that they've managed to reach high approval feedback with all the subclasses before locking in feature sets and details.

Backgrounds offer ability score increases and a starting feat (optional abilities that often provide new or enhanced capabilities); these origin feats are part of the 75 feats featured in the book. The 16 backgrounds in the book – like Hermit, Merchant, Noble, and Sage – flesh out a hero's history and role-playing hooks and also add meaningful mechanical bonuses.

Species have all been revisited to bring new life and options, including a renaming from the long-used term of Race. "For years when D&D used the word race, it meant race as in the term human race," Crawford says. "And we found that given the number of times we were explaining that, we thought, how can we change the word to just be the word that we mean, which is species." The classic options like humans and elves – which, incidentally, are by far the most popular selections by players – are joined by new included options, like the planetouched Aasimar, the hulking Goliath, and mighty Orcs.

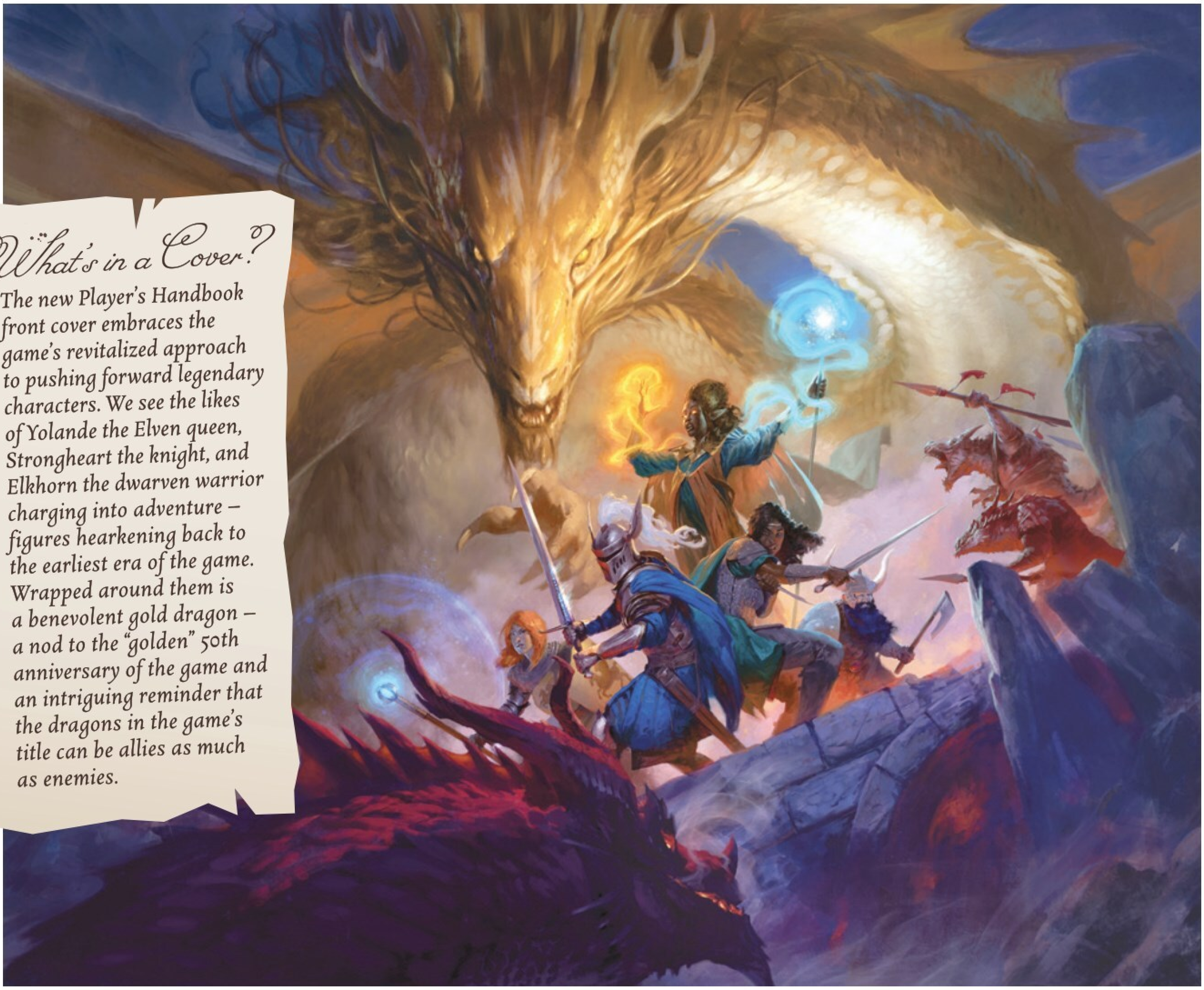
Equipment usage sees one of the most notable new additions. The new Weapon Mastery features ensure martial classes like Fighters and Rogues receive new tactical options to capitalize on, mirroring some of the flex spellcasters already enjoy. A Rogue might leverage a dagger's "Nick" ability, providing an extra attack as part of their action, reserving that crucial bonus action for dashing away, disengaging, or hiding. Short swords instead have "Vex," which provides an advantage on the next attack. These weapon masteries, which can be changed out during a long rest, promise to make weapon-focused characters far more dynamic.

In addition, the newly expanded equipment section features a new tools section with specific actions connected to each and a newly expanded item crafting section, including rules for spell scrolls and potions of healing.

The spell chapter houses an overwhelming array of magical options, including returning spells from the 2014 Player's Handbook, popular options culled from other books in the last 10 years, and new spells like "Tasha's Bubbling Cauldron."

Finally, one of the features I'm most excited about is an expanded appendix introducing the D&D multiverse to players. Prior core D&D releases would often stop short of offering detail about the myriad campaign settings or focus exclusively on one of them – often the Forgotten Realms. The revised books are more explicit in embracing the vastness of D&D worlds, including the likes of Krynn, Eberron, Spelljammer, Planescape, and Greyhawk, while also openly touting that every gaming table around the world has their own (often homebrewed) world in the mix of that multiverse.

"When anybody asks Jeremy or me what the core setting of D&D is, we tell them it's the multiverse," Perkins says. "And that surprises a lot of people. They think we would default to some particular world. But we recognize that not only does the multiverse include all the settings we've created, but it includes everybody's world, right? These revisions are a chance for us to double down on that." It's a refreshing way to approach the fiction, suggesting Wizards of the Coast isn't shying away from the breadth and richness of five decades of settings.



Artist Credit:
Tyler Jacobson
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What's in a Cover?

The new Player's Handbook front cover embraces the game's revitalized approach to pushing forward legendary characters. We see the likes of Yolande the Elven queen, Strongheart the knight, and Elkhorn the dwarven warrior charging into adventure – figures hearkening back to the earliest era of the game. Wrapped around them is a benevolent gold dragon – a nod to the "golden" 50th anniversary of the game and an intriguing reminder that the dragons in the game's title can be allies as much as enemies.

Behind the Screen

During my visit, I saw fewer finished pages from the Dungeon Master's Guide and Monster Manual, but there was still plenty to discover. Scheduled to release in the months that follow the Player's Handbook launch, these two other volumes are just as integral to the game.

The designers state a clear objective for the Dungeon Master's Guide: to make it an indispensable resource in and outside of play. For years, it's been valuable for its treasure trove of magic items, and that functionality remains a big part of its importance, including all sorts of new items to tempt the party.

But the new version aims higher. "We always talked about wanting the [Dungeon Master's Guide] to show, not tell," Perkins says. "So, it's not enough to simply tell you how to make an adventure. We're going to show you some adventures written in a way that the [Dungeon Master (DM)] will want to emulate for their own campaign." Sample adventures are roughly half-a-page, and presented as springboards for DMs to flesh out, alongside specific advice for efficient session prep.

Much of the book is structured around these types of concrete tools, resources, and guidance. Numerous sample maps are included, waiting to be filled with traps and monsters. What do you use a DM's screen for? How do you design an encounter? Guidelines provide a framework for buying and making magic items. The book is a toolbox for ideas.

↙

Every subclass gets a dedicated illustration, like this wild magic halfling sorcerer

Artist Credit: Ekaterina Burmak

One of the conspicuous additions to that toolbox is bastions. Experienced DMs have experimented with the idea of headquarters since the earliest days of the game; this articulated system for strongholds and bases of operations for the PCs gives all groups the tools to enjoy the concept. "Bastions are optional," Crawford explains. "But in any campaign where bastions are used, they give the players something back at home that they care about. Because not only is it a place, but there are also people who work in that bastion, and the player will get to decide who those people are." Different PCs might build shrines, theaters, wizard towers, and secluded nature groves, merge them together, and gain tangible game benefits from their work. Characters can complete "bastion turns" between adventures, which can play out both at the table or away from it. It's player-controlled rather than dictated by the DM and lets everyone at the table introduce new role-playing elements through intrigue, romance, friendship, mentoring, and more.

Furthering the focus on the D&D multiverse, the Dungeon Master's Guide includes a full lore glossary, helping to shed light on the many names and places peppered into the game over decades and spread out across entirely separate universes. If you've wanted to know who Venger is, what makes the city of Baldur's Gate special, or the covert nature of the Harpers, it's a good bet the lore glossary will help.

Even as the multiverse of D&D worlds sees increased attention, the Dungeon Master's Guide also offers a more discrete setting to get gaming groups started. After very few official releases in the last couple of decades, the world of Greyhawk takes center stage. The book fleshes out Greyhawk to illustrate how to create campaign settings of your own. Greyhawk was the original D&D game world crafted by D&D co-creator Gary Gygax, and a worthy setting to revisit on the occassion of D&D's golden anniversary. It's a world bristling with classic sword and sorcery concepts, from an intrigue-laden central city to wide tracts of uncharted wilderness. Compared to many D&D campaign settings, it's smaller and less fleshed out, and that's sort of the point; it begs for DMs to make it their own. The book offers ample info to bring Greyhawk to life but leaves much undetailed. For those eager to take the plunge, an included poster map of the Greyhawk setting sets the tone, and its reverse reveals a map of the city of the same name. "A big draw to Greyhawk is it's the origin place for such heroes as Mordenkainen, Tasha, and others," Perkins says. "There's this idea that the players in your campaign can be the next great world-hopping, spell-crafting heroes of D&D. It is the campaign where heroes are born."

Monstrous Options

The Monster Manual is the biggest that Wizards of the Coast has ever produced, featuring over 500 monsters. 75 of them are brand new to the game.

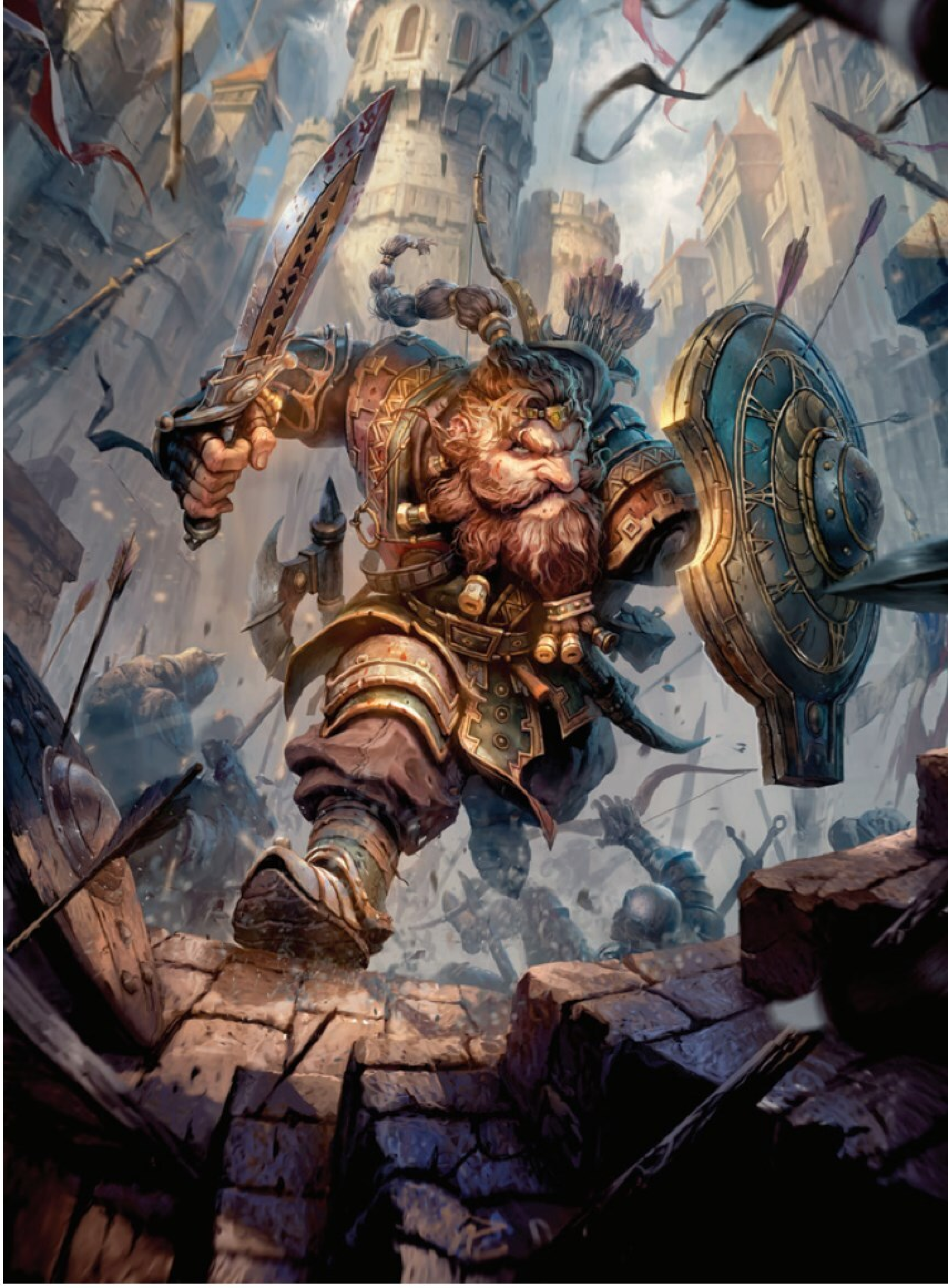
Among the monsters that have returned, no creature's stat block has remained untouched in the revision. In every case, the benefit of countless play sessions and campaigns is leveraged to rebalance and enrich, with the hope that encounters become more nuanced and exciting.

The challenge rating governing each monster's difficulty remains the same, maintaining the commitment to backward compatibility. However, the new versions here often have more distinctive features and greater opportunity for variability. Many monsters now have expanded "families" of connected monsters, building out ecosystems of linked and themed types.

"A great example of this is vampires," Crawford says. "We realized as popular as vampires are, it's actually hard to encounter them earlier in your adventuring career because they'll wreck you. But on the other side, if you get really high level, vampires kind of go out of style power-wise because it'll eventually get to a point where you can just steamroll them. So, what we've done is we've created a new lower challenge rating vampire – a person who is in the process of becoming a vampire. And we've also added a much higher [challenge rating] vampire called a Nightbringer, who is more powerful than the stock vampire we had previously. And so now you have not only a bigger challenge rating range for encountering vampires, but you also have a clearer narrative about the vampires."

One of my favorite additions to the Monster Manual is an invigorated approach to epic titan-type encounters – the apex of the monster food chain. "One of our goals was to create a set of monsters that would feel like peers to the tarrasque and to ancient dragons," Crawford says. "For instance, the Blob of Annihilation is so big; imagine a gelatinous cube that can absorb entire towns. If you see the Blob of Annihilation coming, it's a catastrophe." Other examples include the Elemental Juggernaut, Colossus constructs that can crush a building with a single step, or startlingly dangerous high fey like the Archhag. These are the devastating encounters that player groups laugh and muse about meeting as they commiserate around the table.

Rounding things out, the focus on NPCs in the 2024 Monster Manual has been greatly expanded to offer entire varied groups within a given theme – like bandits, pirates, entertainers, mages – each provided for ease of dropping into play without need for prep, and at various levels of powers to match the needs of the game.



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Each class section opens with a full-page image of an iconic representation, like this indomitable dwarven fighter

Artist Credit:
Néstor Ossandón Leal

Turning the Page

As Dungeons & Dragons turns 50 years old, its impact on the video and tabletop gaming world is undeniable. After a decade that saw tremendous growth for the brand and for the role-playing hobby as a whole, a new revision of the game releases into a far more competitive and complex landscape for the tabletop role-playing scene.

We still have months before all three books are in our hands and the next phase of D&D's long history begins in earnest. In advance of that, it's clear the team crafting this next iteration of the game is ready to defend its long legacy, not through reinvention, but through measured, thoughtful expansion and revision, alongside a drive to perfect a system that has shaped and informed the entire gaming landscape for decades. ■

Want more details about the future of D&D? We've got additional art and insight from the team building the revised rulebooks at GameInformer.com

TOP FIVE

HELLS

Some games metaphorically put you through hell, but others literally put you through Hell. These are our favorite representations of the realm of suffering in gaming

BY BRIAN SHEA

1 In **Doom**, an unknown marine must pass through the gates of Hell to stop a demonic invasion after a teleportation experiment goes horribly wrong. Whether you're talking the influential 1993 original or 2020's Doom Eternal, blasting, ripping, and tearing through Satan's forces has never been so much fun.

2 When gamers think of Hell in video games, a lot of them probably picture the version from the **Diablo** series. Since 1997, Blizzard's action/RPG franchise has sent us into the depths to face off against the likes of Lilith, Baal, Mephisto, and Diablo himself.

3 Inspired by the underworld of Greek mythology, **Hades** challenges players to escape the realm of the dead. Players explore Supergiant's vibrant imagining of the afterlife, interacting with its colorful inhabitants in a version of the underworld we don't mind spending more time in.

4 Based on Dante Alighieri's *Inferno from Divine Comedy*, Visceral Games' 2010 **Dante's Inferno** might be the most fleshed-out adaptation of Hell in gaming history. With themed circles of Hell to fight through and recognizable figures from the past to take down, we are still in awe of the care the developers took.

5 The **Disgaea** series' Netherworld is the most humorous interpretation of Hell on this list. It's also the largest as it is a collective of multiple realms ruled by Overlords and occupied by zany, attitudinal demons, and the adorable penguin-like Prinnies. ■

OPINION

Gaming as the Third Place

BY MATT MILLER

The culture around social interaction is constantly shifting, but those profoundly strange years of the pandemic were especially jarring. In the wake of such a weird cultural moment, I'm certainly not the only one left wondering how the dust settles, especially as it relates to how we meet up, build friendships and relationships, and socialize. If you're a gamer, answering those questions requires an additional layer of complexity since we spend much of our free time in virtual worlds. I've found myself wondering where our favorite hobby fits into the equation.

For some years, the "third place" gave a name to a thing that's been part of our lives forever. If home is your first place, and work is your second, the third place is the other social and gathering hub for your life as part of a community. But especially in the wake of COVID, it seems clear that many people have adjusted their relationship to social clubs, churches, coffee shops, bars, and public meet-ups. As many individuals disconnected from some of those social spaces, there's a void we haven't all yet filled.

Into that void have come the virtual places of our lives, whether they play out on social media or, as is likely if you're reading this, in online games. Increasingly, games act as their own communities, often equaling or surpassing the thought and energy we put into other activities.

Indeed, much of that energy is the playing of those games – the countless hours of Call of Duty or Fortnite matches, raiding in Destiny 2 or World of Warcraft, or socializing and joking with friends in cooperative runs at Helldivers 2 or Deep Rock Galactic. We pour our attention into these games and are rewarded with relaxation, the excitement of discovery, and a growing sense of mastery.

It's also the conversations and expertise that arise around those games. We comb through subreddits and community forums to discuss strategy. We read websites and magazines (like this one) to understand the games better. We build friendships that persist for years around shared adventures and discoveries in a virtual space, further fleshed out on platforms like Discord. In these places, even single-player games feel like social hubs for interaction and engagement as we seek out others who share our excitement for a given character or franchise.

Despite my love of games and the friendships I have formed as I've played them with others, I have to admit to some ambivalence. I treasure those late-night moments of triumph against a raid boss, but I miss more frequent in-person get-togethers with my buddies. I get excited about the many conversations about a game I like online, but I rarely feel like the connections I make there persist into real friendships.

None of that is to disparage the connections and enthusiasm we all find in our gaming. But there's no doubt we can get too much of a good thing. Even with a nearly endless selection of games to enjoy, we've all come across sobering articles where we learn that many in the same demographic of core gamers feel lonely and isolated. That's not a clear line of causation, but it does give reason to pause. If gaming is our new third place, is it meeting all the goals that older social gathering places once did? Should we really expect them to? That's a heavy weight for someone's hobby to have to bear.

I'd assert that the culture may have moved past the concept of a single third place. Whether it's individual games, shared virtual social spaces, or traditional gathering places of the past, humans are animals that crave connection, and we make communities in the places we can. I don't think we need to shy away from the interconnectedness that can arise from gaming, even while simultaneously seeking interaction elsewhere. At the same time, even while acknowledging my great love of games, I think they can be a trap that keeps us from forming other friendships and relationships. Like so many things in life, it's finding a middle ground – embracing new routes to virtual connections without forgetting about the real-world options just outside our door. ■

The Star

STAR WARS STARFIGHTER
STAR WARS STARFIGHTER
WARNING

Last fighter

LucasArts' long-lost Star Wars arcade game lives on, hidden between fields of corn

BY ELIJAH BEAHM

The early 2000s were a golden age for Star Wars games. From mega-hits like Knights of the Old Republic and Battlefront to niche but still beloved games like Bounty Hunter, it seemed LucasArts could do no wrong, regardless of platform. Though arcades had started to lose their allure as home consoles increasingly outpaced their capabilities, LucasArts still saw fit to release two final arcade adaptations of their beloved tie-ins.

The more commonly known is Star Wars: Racer Arcade by Sega-AM5, which features an impressive control scheme styled after Anakin Skywalker's podracer from the film. This would, rather unceremoniously, be the last of several Sega-produced Star Wars arcade games. Instead, the honor of producing the final cabinet in this pre-Disney era would fall to Tsunami Visual Technologies, a small, intrepid team based out of Fremont, California. Tsunami made a name for itself by adapting traditional home console games into arcade cabinets, particularly flight games, making it a perfect fit for adapting Secret Level's classic action flight-sim Star Wars: Starfighter.

This isn't to say it'd be an easy development – the cabinet wouldn't be released until two years after the original game's launch on PlayStation 2. Aiming to be even more immersive than any Star Wars cabinet before, with its TsuMo tech incorporating a moving pilot cockpit that'd react with the player, Tsunami Visual Technologies went all out. While it did recycle some design elements from its Crimson Skies cabinet, Starfighter Arcade also featured a custom N1 starfighter-themed seat packed with motion tech and a full, built-in HOTAS (hands-on throttle-and-stick) flight sim control scheme, like an actual aircraft's controls. Yet for many eager Star Wars fans, this was where the story abruptly stopped.

Starfighter Arcade cabinets were distributed to arcades, but they were Tsunami's last, rather expensively designed cabinets, so there weren't many. To date, according to the Vintage Arcade Preservation Society, only ten cabinets are confirmed in circulation, with five owned by members of their community. And one of those is in pieces. There is little documentation and scarcely a hint of marketing beyond two posters to prove that Starfighter Arcade even existed. The most evidence for years was whenever a cabinet went to auction, often selling for $7,000 or more.

To make matters more complicated, Sega's cabinets boast a far greater presence at arcades by a considerable margin, with both its Trilogy and Racer cabinets even reaching more rural arcades. With a generic name like "Starfighter," many mistake it for an older cabinet. When I first began investigating Starfighter's existence, I half-wondered if it was a tall tale. Anyone I could find who'd come in contact with it only saw it in passing. Wookieepedia's page for the cabinet was a dead link. I had nearly given up on confirming its existence, until browsing Facebook Marketplace one late night. Amid Minnesota's many eclectic collector's items, I found it; Starfighter Arcade, actually listed for sale. The owner even recorded gameplay footage of his eldest son testing it out.

Impressively, this wasn't just the cabinet with some dusty or rusted circuit boards, but one in proper working order. The seat even moved properly. The speakers were crisp and clear. Tsunami's swan song was real and alive after two decades. Star Wars gaming's Bigfoot – a game so forgotten and buried that the leaked prototypes of canceled Star Wars titles like Battlefront 3 are easier to find – was just ... there. Nestled in the back of an arcade in the farming town of Olivia, Minnesota.

Adam Ferguson is a proud member of the local Olivia community. He's a father to three kids, radiating Midwestern optimism. His wife, Blanca, has been serving on the City Council for over five years while working as a trained paralegal, and as Adam can attest, she's also a deft hand in the arcade. "Claw machines are her favorite. She's practically a pro now," Adam says. Together, she and Adam also run the Olivia Innovation Center when not managing the Corncade, the latter founded in 2022, named after Olivia's vast fields of corn. There's an undeniable poetry to it all: a good ol' farmboy and an impassioned political activist going on a quest to recover a long-lost Star Wars artifact. However, the Fergusons would have to make their own Kessel Run, twice, to find and retrieve the cabinet first.

At the time owned by a collector in Nebraska, he contacted Adam with a once-in-a-lifetime offer. "He was selling off a *ton* of games," Adam recalls. "Told me we had to come check it out. So we left ASAP. Picked out some games, [and] a couple of weeks later we drove out again, picked up a U-Haul. Filled it up. Had to rent a trailer to fit the rest behind this 26-foot truck. It was amazing! Craziest thing we've ever done."

Yet, Starfighter Arcade almost slipped through Adam's fingers between their trips. "This was on our second trip to Nebraska. The first time we saw it, [the owner] told us it was sold. Super bummed. But then the buyer backs out of the deal. It's up for grabs again! Being a big fan of the films only boosted my want and need to show this to our community." As if echoing its costly development, it was a high price worth paying for such an impossible find. "It was an expensive game, but even knowing this one would never pay for itself, I didn't care." Adam recalls with a laugh, "Load it up!'" Yet little did he know what was packed up in the back of his car. "I'd never seen it before but didn't think it was *such* a rare game."

The cabinet's two decades of heavy use were apparent, but it'd held up remarkably well. What parts weren't in order, Ferguson swiftly went to work on it with his son David, as the pair regularly refurbished any new additions to the Corncade to their former glory. "[David] enjoys his time off, hanging out with his friends," Adam says. Their goal is, as Adam puts it, "Capturing a moment in time that was simple and great. A time where anyone could be a champion. A high scorer. All it took was a quarter or two." It was precisely that desire to capture a bygone piece of history that we connected over during conversation. Adam was excited to have footage recorded of the game in action for documentation and preservation; as of this writing, he's also looking to back up the cabinet's software so that it can be properly preserved digitally.

Stepping into Adam's arcade was truly like traveling through time. Though he features some more modern cabinets, such as Temple Run, Mach Storm, and an emulation station, his restored classics instantly take you back to the Y2K era. When asked which of his collection is his favorite, he has to admit, "We love all of them!" but if he had to pick, Ferguson nods to Mach Storm. "[It's] one of our faves! Most people out here have never seen anything like it before, so bringing a flight simulator to Olivia, Minnesota, was super cool."

Soon enough, I was flying as well, though it's fair to say with even the Force at my side, Starfighter Arcade took a page out of Emperor Palpatine's book. The machine is a fascinating, brutal beast of a cabinet. While it primarily recycles assets and levels from the console game's early stages, it also features some unexpectedly restored cut content. Most notably, there's a line of dialogue and an entire boss fight centered around destroying Trade Federation lander ships that were infuriatingly indestructible in the home console game. There's also an entire alternate version of the grassy plains stage, featuring a winding Federation camp on the exterior and a massive city under the energy dome instead of a furtive military outpost for the Naboo Resistance.

I really had the time to soak it all in as I died under the vicious incoming fire of the Trade Federation. It's fairly evident that to help make back the cost of such an expensive machine, Tsunami's developers cranked up the difficulty, with you needing to shoot all incoming missiles while receiving next to no health drops at any stage, paired with slow recharge times on your cluster bomb alt-fire. You adapt quickly enough, but it's intense. The shifting seat and HOTAS controls really do pull you in, just long enough to frantically try to survive – oddly, the tutorial stage is the second hardest level. Yet, even as I threw more tokens in, I was wonderfully engaged. Adam hopped by now and then, asking how the controls were holding up, and if they needed any further tweaks.

Some muscle reflexes from the console game translate over to the arcade, as it uses the exact same code for the projectiles and enemies. Granted, the latter are sometimes reused in

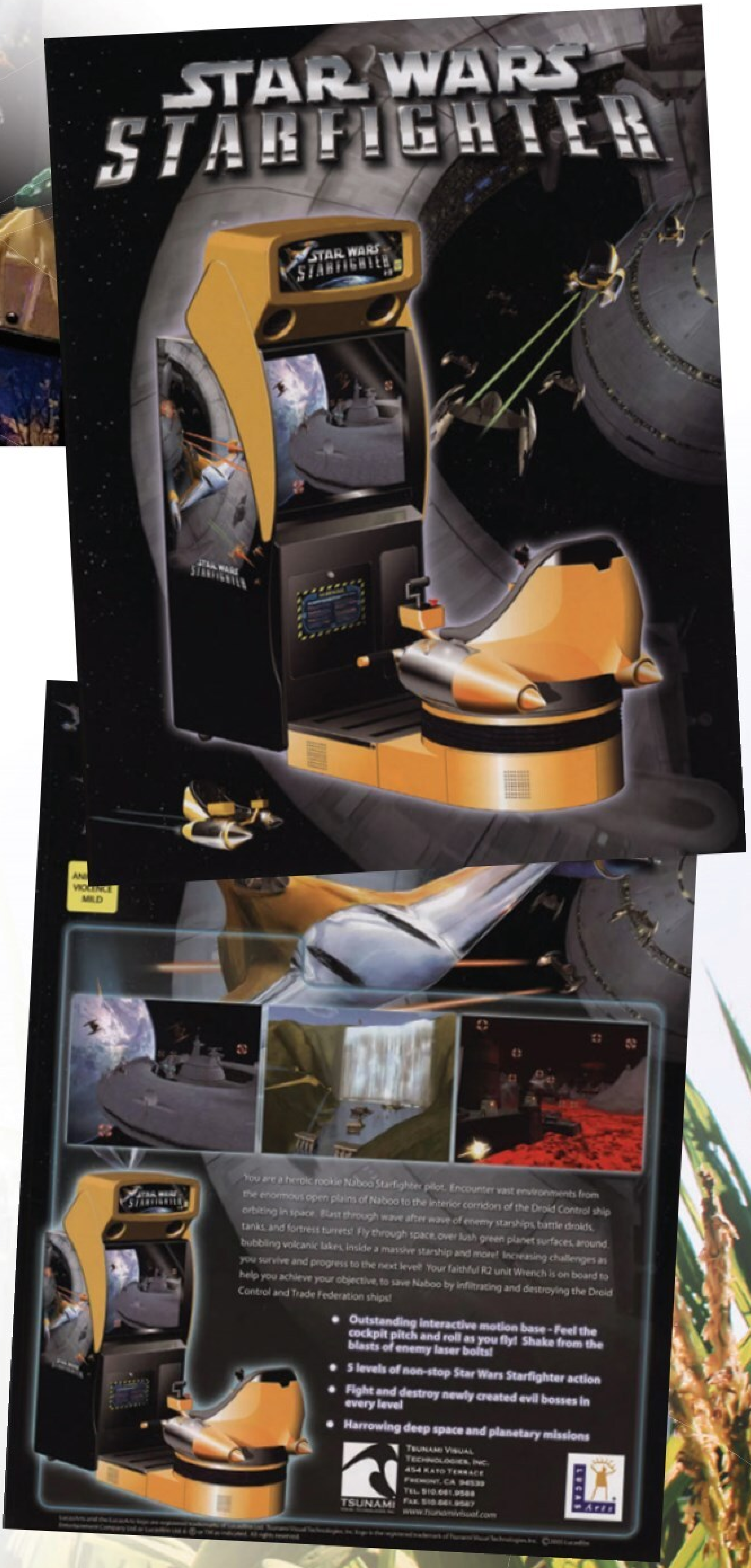
SEGA
TOP SKATER
SEGA SKATEBOARDING
STAR WARS
STARFIGHTER

> *[Our goal is] capturing a moment in time that was simple and great. A time where anyone could be a champion. A high scorer. All it took was a quarter or two." – Adam Ferguson*

surprising ways, such as boss variants and new enemy wave combinations. All the while, explosions ensconce you with two overhead surround sound speakers making sure you hear every blaster shot ring out. Starfighter Arcade might be the last gasp of an era for both classic Star Wars arcade games and its developers' contributions to arcades at large, but it doesn't go quietly. Snappy, responsive, and utterly unrelenting – it's the spirit of arcade shoot-em-ups in rare form, which is what makes it all worth it to the Fergusons.

The Corncade wasn't simply started as a business venture or hobby, but instead as an answer to a need in the Olivia community. "We love this little town. We're raising our children here. We've watched local kids grow up and have seen how rough some of their lives are." After a local tragedy, Adam and Blanca sought to offer a safe space for kids in the area. "We see people from all walks of life come through our door. They're allowed to be themselves here. These kids deserve a chance at innocence, a childhood. They're having to grow up too quickly, potentially starting down a troubling path. We're trying to stop that [and] bring them back to the simple things in life. An arcade is the perfect place for that."

"We still feel the resistance from some, but it only takes a friend to get them out of the house. They see a different view on what life can be if you go back to something pure and fun." Ensuring younger and poorer players aren't left out, the Fergusons have also started a local fund, Quarters for Kids. "It gives kids who don't have a lot of money the ability to play or enjoy some ice cream or pizza. They get to see a different view of what life can be."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As I visited, it was fantastic to see the Fergusons in action: Blanca chatting with visitors, Adam serving ice cream, David working on a projector unit for a cabinet, and their youngest eagerly sweeping the floors between matches of Tekken on their emulation station. They're all working together in sync, making things brighter, and the response heartens them immensely. As Adam puts it, "All of the feedback we get from the kids, and parents, and grandparents; their excitement is infectious! Helping the kids get their prizes. The smiles and thank yous we get. Then, when you see them come back, we know that what we're doing here is making an impact on their lives. That's the greatest reward."

When I set out to find a lost piece of gaming history, I thought I was merely uncovering one marvelous discovery. The Fergusons are not only preserving a form of gaming typically relegated to collectors' back rooms, but restoring it for a new lease on life, just like what they're working towards for children in and around Olivia. It was heartening and humbling to see games from across the decades bringing joy to a whole new generation, letting kids just enjoy being kids. ■

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THE 2024 GRAD GIFT GUIDE

Students across the land are donning gowns and readying their cap-throwing arms. If you've got a gaming or tech fan celebrating their big accomplishment, it's likely you may also be looking for a way to congratulate them on their achievement. We've assembled a curated selection of tech, toys, tabletop games, and more to delight the new graduate this year.

BY MATT MILLER

❶ RAZER BLACKSHARK V2 PRO HEADSET FOR CONSOLES

Razer's continued iteration on the Blackshark headset line has borne fruit with this excellent product release, which joins a prior iteration that was more targeted to PC players. Extremely impressive battery life is a big selling point, as is the overall sound quality. That high fidelity is supported by THX Spatial Audio tech, which does wonders in a tense game when zeroing in on targets. If you've sometimes struggled with mic issues, that's another win, as the captured sound is crystal clear. The headset is exclusively wireless, and there are separate versions for Xbox and PS5, so that knowledge should factor into a purchase decision. Nonetheless, for a well-rounded and satisfying gaming audio solution on your console of choice, it's an excellent selection.

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PgDn

❷ iBUYPOWER SLATE MESH GAMING PC

So you're looking to go big for your grad gift but not quite ready to spring for that new car? We've got you covered. IBUYPOWER's pre-built PCs provide an excellent route into high-end PC gaming for those not interested in fiddling with a piece-by-piece build. The spec (as priced) has no problem handling even the most technically demanding of modern games, thanks to components like its Intel Core i7-14700KF Processor and GeForce RTX 4070 Super graphics card. If your giftee is instead the type who wants to craft their own, the beautiful and customizable ARGB case is an affordable start to the build.

$1,900 (Full PC), Case ($99) | *ibuypower.com*

❸ FOR THE QUEEN

This surprising storytelling card game is seeing a refresh and re-release under Darrington Press, complete with brand-new breathtaking art. Players set out one of 13 lavishly illustrated art cards to represent the queen, and each player takes on the role of part of her entourage on a long journey. A series of question cards prompt each player to detail and expand upon the nature of the queen and their relationship to her, leading to a new emergent narrative every time it's encountered. The game is quick-playing, creative, and compact enough to take anywhere – a perfect fit for the story enthusiast in your retinue.

$25 | *darringtonpress.com*

❹ THE LORD OF THE RINGS ARTISAN KEYCAPS

Does the target of your gift-giving celebrate the works of Tolkien, enjoy the feel of mechanical keyboards, and spend ample time at the computer? Congratulations, we've found your gift! These gorgeous individual keycaps from Drop are handcrafted by Dwarf Factory and made of resin with transparent elements. Each features a tiny but incredibly detailed call-out to the world of Middle-earth visualized in 3D, including the helm of Sauron and a Morgul Fellbeast. For our money, it's hard to beat the Eye of Barad-dur, gazing out across its domain. Each keycap is an SA R1 profile cap compatible with the ubiquitous Cherry MX switches and its clones.

$65 apiece | *drop.com*

❶ NANOLEAF SCREEN MIRROR

Nanoleaf has become a favorite of streamers thanks to its neon-accented lighting and customizable LED décor, but the product that will most elevate your gaming experience is the Nanoleaf 4D. The screen mirror kit includes an adhesive lightstrip, control console, and camera for your monitor, allowing you to sync the lighting behind your TV with what is on your screen in real time. Best of all, you can add the device to your phone and control it using the Nanoleaf app, Apple Home, or Google Home, letting you sync with other devices, including other Nanoleaf products like its popular Shapes panels.

$100 | *nanoleaf.me*

❷ HALO COLLAR 3

When we regularly recommend high-end wearable tech, it's usually for things like watches and sunglasses. However, if your celebrating graduate has a four-legged friend at the center of their life, the Halo collar might be just the thing. A phone app is your chief interface to set up boundaries anywhere you go, whether in a backyard, your favorite picnic spot, or a friend's ranch in another state, keeping your dog contained within a precise GPS space you establish. If they ever run off while on a walk, the collar provides real-time tracking and a whistle function to summon them back. The whole system involves a few weeks of training upfront, but it's a solid option to give your graduate and their best friend more freedom to enjoy each other.

$600 | *halocollar.com*

❸ iPHONE 15 PRO

We've all got some variation of a phone in our pocket. We occasionally like to check in on how the different tech is treating gamers. On that front, the iPhone 15 Pro continues to be an enticing choice for several reasons. The A17 Pro Chip offers unparalleled visual fidelity for gaming – it's a big reason why we're increasingly seeing triple-A PC and console games like Resident Evil Village and Death Stranding make their way to mobile screens. And between the Apple Arcade subscription service and an ever-increasing selection of standalone titles, the mobile gaming market is on a different level than just a few years ago. While those features might first capture gamers' attention, the improvements to camera, battery life, and the new ultralight titanium build are ample evidence of how Apple is holding onto its crown.

Starting at $999 | *apple.com*

❹ STAR WARS YODA FORCE FX ELITE LIGHTSABER

"Pass on what you have learned," Yoda tells Luke in *Return of the Jedi*. No Star Wars character better represents the passage of knowledge from one generation to the next than the ancient Jedi master. A gift of his lightsaber is a nod to the completion of training, but it's also just a thrilling collectible. The green blade is scaled smaller than many other lightsabers, but true masters know that size matters not in a fight. The shimmering saber features progressive ignition, battle clash lights and sounds, and a removable kyber crystal, among other fun features, and can be displayed with or without the blade on the included stand.

$250 | *gamestop.com* | *hasbropulse.com*

❺ TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES GALLERY DIORAMAS

The Turtles have been a fixture of the pop culture landscape for a long time, and these striking new statues are an excellent way for your graduate to celebrate their longtime fandom. Each of the four mutant heroes stands roughly 10 inches in height. The meticulously detailed sculptures aim to bring each brother's personality to the forefront. You can pick a favorite or snag all four, which can be lined up on the shelf or displayed bunched on their rooftop perch.

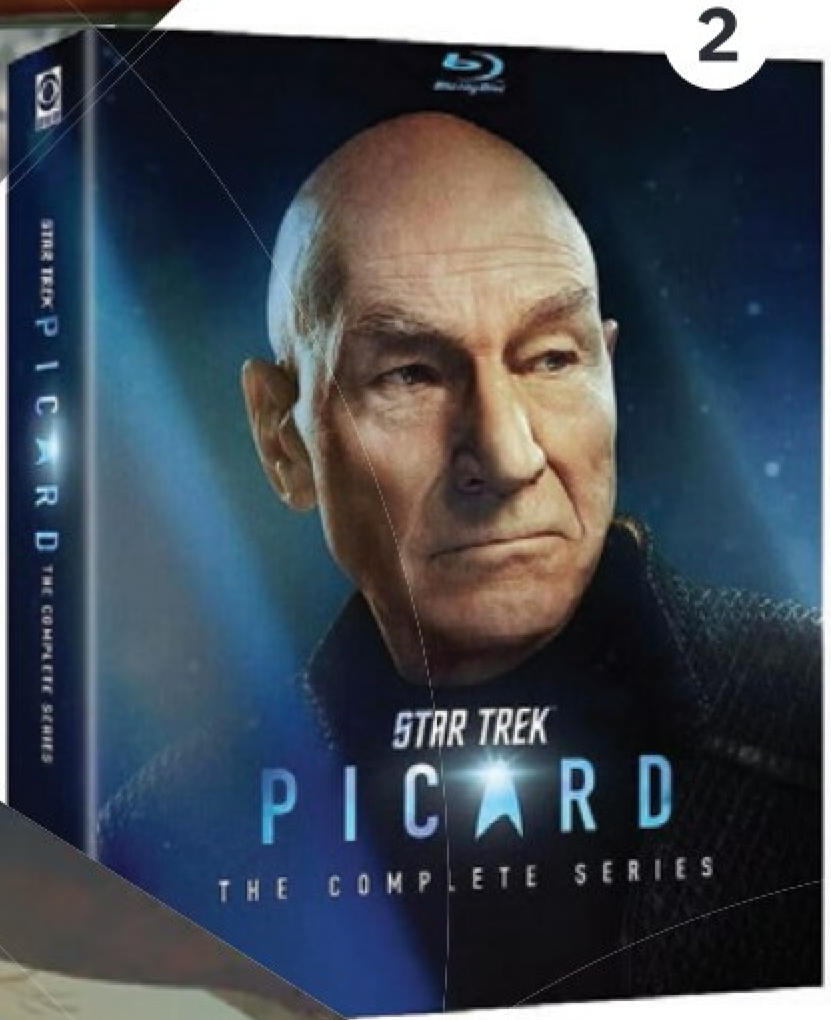
$60-75 apiece | *diamondselecttoys.com*

❻ CYBERPUNK 2077: GANGS OF NIGHT CITY

CD Projekt's evocative sci-fi opus makes its way to the board game scene with this gritty competitive play. Up to four players each navigate one of the infamous gangs of the city, like the Tyger Claws or Animals, as you each try to take control of the criminal opportunities across the sprawling neon city. Powers are asymmetric between the gangs, lending a lot of replay value and nuance to turns. The best part of the game is the interaction from the many mechanics at play, from area control to combat to economy management, even as different story scenarios play out. Together, it makes for a rewarding and thematic play for anyone who loves this dark futuristic setting.

$110 | *store.asmodee.com*

Cyberpunk 2077
JOHNNY SILVERHAND
JUDY ALVAREZ
ROGUE AMENDIARES
6



THE VALE OF ETERNITY
3
Stone Golem
Pegasus
Exalted Genie
Sea Spirit
mandoo

❶ ZELDA HYRULE TRIFORCE MINI BACKPACK

Fans of The Legend of Zelda, in its many incarnations, should be delighted by this visually appealing little bag. At 11 inches in height, this isn't the roomy book carrier they'll need when they head off to pursue their next degree. Instead, it's a fun fashion accessory that's big enough to haul around personal effects, tablets, or perhaps the Switch system on which they're replaying Tears of the Kingdom. The synthetic leather features embossed patterns and the recognizable Triforce metal symbol near the top.

$49 | *shop.bioworldmerch.com*

❷ *STAR TREK: PICARD* THE COMPLETE SERIES BLU-RAY BOXED SETE

Many sci-fi enthusiasts have wholly transitioned away from physical discs in favor of streaming. However, a boxed set is still the way to go for fans who want the comprehensive package, especially if you're looking for this level of breadth and depth in bonus features. Along with all 30 episodes of *Star Trek: Picard*, the return of *The Next Generation* captain is accompanied by gag reels, deleted scenes, and extensive featurettes on the making of the show; one of the best additions is a commentary track for several of the season 3 episodes that saw the original cast reunite.

$55 | *startrek.com*

❸ THE VALE OF ETERNITY

In board gaming circles, there's sometimes a misperception that you must have a large and expensive game if you want rewarding strategy and depth, but games like The Vale of Eternity help buck that notion. Players compete to tame unusual magical creatures, eventually seeking control of mighty dragons. The whimsical art is compelling, but the clever approach to card drafting on each turn will keep players coming back, thanks to a fascinating approach to acquisition that uses discrete "stones" that each have a specific value. Despite its charming presentation, The Vale of Eternity can be a competitive and challenging play as each player vies for victory while often squashing the potential for other players to succeed. For such a fast and approachable game, it also features hidden depth.

$35 | *renegadegamestudios.com*

❹ MARVEL'S X-MEN CYCLOPS BUST

It's been too long since we've had reason to celebrate the tactics genius leading the X-Men into battle, but the recent *X-Men '97* show helped remind fans that Scott Summers is a particularly compelling superhero when he's given the chance to shine. The new half-scale bust features Cyclops' iconic blue-and-yellow suit with intricate texturing, his '90s-era headgear, an X-Men-themed base, and some awesome trailing wisps of energy after that last Sentinel he blew away.

$175 | *gentlegiantltd.com*

❺ AVATAR LEGENDS THE ROLEPLAYING GAME BUNDLE

The imaginative world of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* has gotten some new attention recently thanks to the Netflix live-action adaptation, but the excitement around the original series has never really gone away. Graduates who share a love of the shows and an enthusiasm for tabletop role-playing should find a lot to appreciate in this faithful game adaptation. Players navigate action-packed stories set across the eras described in the shows, and the mechanics focus on a character's need to find balance between extremes – a big theme within the fiction – as well as a slick system for completing cool "moves" that emulate the martial arts motions players expect in this universe. This recommended bundle includes the game's core book plus a ton of extras like a GM screen, action card deck, and a dice pack. ■

$100 | *magpiegames.com*

Disclaimer: Recommended products are selected by our editorial team, independent of our parent company, GameStop

AVATAR
LEGENDS
THE ROLEPLAYING GAME
DICE PACK
COMBAT ACTION DECK
BASIC MOVES
5

DIGITAL ECLIPSE
SOFTWARE INC

PRESERVATION THROUGH PLAY

How Digital Eclipse's Gold Master series brings video game history to life

BY MARCUS STEWART

CENTIPE
ATARI
DIGITAL ECLIPSE

FEW TYPES OF MEDIA HOOK ME like a good documentary. The genre uses the best elements of traditional filmmaking to amplify what will always be the greatest story ever told: reality. Whether it's an educational look at the natural world, a gripping true crime tale, or an enlightening biography of a noteworthy figure, the best documentaries manage to educate as effectively as they entertain.

The video games industry is now old enough to have been subjected to its fair share of documentaries, from *The King of Kong to Indie Game: The Movie* to Netflix's *High Score*. But no matter how good they are, they all generate a tough-to-pin-down anxiety in me I never consciously noticed until recently: By the time the film ends, or, more often, in the middle of it, I just want to stop watching and play the games in question.

It's a frustration shared by Chris Kohler, the editorial director at Digital Eclipse. And it's one of the reasons why he enjoys working on the studio's Gold Master Series. Essentially the gaming equivalent of the Criterion Collection, it consists of two titles, The Making of Karateka and Llamasoft: The Jeff Minter Story. Each game takes players on a playable history lesson of its subjects, be it a single game, a creator, or an entire studio. The result is a new genre Digital Eclipse can call its own: the interactive documentary.

BUILT ON PRESERVATION

Digital Eclipse has led the charge in commercial video game emulation since its early years. Founded in 1992 as Williams Digital Arcade, it specialized in creating arcade-accurate console ports of classic arcade titles via emulation at a time when this was mainly accomplished by replicating an arcade game's code from scratch.

"It was if you went and bought *The Godfather* on VHS, and it was just new people trying to recreate the version of *The Godfather* that was on film instead of somebody coming up with technology that would allow you to take a filmstrip and get that information onto a Blu-ray or DVD or whatever it is," Kohler explains.

Digital Eclipse is a pioneer in commercial emulation. While the studio's methods equated to a more enjoyable gaming experience, it also served as an early example of game preservation. Kohler says the company was essentially built on the need to pay retro games the proper respect.

The 2000s saw the company undergo a complicated period of mergers and rebrands before reemerging in 2015 as Digital Eclipse once more. This saw the studio shift its focus back towards preservation in the form of retro game compilations such as the Mega Man Legacy Collection, Disney Afternoon Collection, and Street Fighter 30th Anniversary Collection. These titles included bonus features such as long-lost concept art and other development and marketing materials that, with each release, gradually grew from being a sideshow to almost the main attraction.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Cowabunga Collection, released in 2022, is perhaps the most impressive of these game bundles. In addition to packing in 13 old-school TMNT games, it boasts an exhaustive number of forgotten materials such as original magazine ads, scans of the original game boxes and manuals, comic book covers, and never-before-seen concept art. For '80s babies, they weren't just revisiting old TMNT games; they were reliving the franchises' early pop-culture boom while getting a behind-the-scenes look at how these games were brought to life.

DIGITAL ECLIPSE
Kick Man

↗
Top:
Digital Eclipse's
neon-lit arcade

Right, top to bottom:
Atari 50: The Anniversary Celebration, Llamasoft: The Jeff Minter Story, The Making of Karateka, Digital Eclipse CSO and Head of Publishing Justin Bailey summons Karateka's dreaded hawk at the Portland Retro Expo

While retro collections help keep old games alive, Kohler says they only offer the "What" of a game's overall history. They don't provide the "Who," "Where," "How," and, most importantly, the "Why." To fill those gaps, Digital Eclipse needed a fresh approach.

CREATING A GENRE

Kohler joined Digital Eclipse in July 2020. At the time, the company had licensed the Karateka IP from creator Jordan Mechner to create a new retro collection of sorts. Unlike its previous projects, Digital Eclipse had full control over the Karateka game's direction since the studio didn't have to work with a publisher. The Karateka title became Kohler's first major project, and the team also gained access to years' worth of Mechner's personal materials. These included his journals documenting his daily life while developing Karateka, design documents, publisher correspondences, and more. As Kohler pored over decades-old legal negotiations and Mechner's written insights into creating Karateka and other games, he and the team saw the potential to tell Karateka's story in a new fashion.

"And just realizing that there was this incredible narrative behind this game, and because we had Jordan's journals where he was writing down day by day everything that was happening in his life as he was creating this game, we could really go far beyond the idea of the retro collection," says Kohler. "We could really tell this in a narrative way, and the story itself can become the main event, as it were."

The seed for the interactive documentary had been sewn, and the team began brainstorming. What if they could tell a linear story that takes players down the complete timeline of a game's development? Better yet, what if players could play not only the finished product but also its various prototypes?

It was around this time that Digital Eclipse began a partnership with Atari to create a title celebrating the company's 50th anniversary. Coincidentally, Atari wanted something different than the average retro collection, and Digital Eclipse saw this as the perfect opportunity to implement its nascent documentary game concept. The idea that was originally envisioned for The Making of Karateka would make its debut in Atari 50: The Anniversary Collection.

In addition to conducting a staggering amount of research, Digital Eclipse filmed interviews with former Atari employees and industry luminaries. Perhaps most impressively, it included over 100 playable Atari games, from the iconic to the forgotten, via emulation. The result was a robust story of Atari's founding and golden age told through linear timelines divided by chapters. Players read informative blurbs, viewed development documents and other key materials, watched documentary clips, and, of course, played the games that define a generation. As a bonus, it had even developed modern reimaginings of select titles.

The result was a resounding success. Atari 50 earned widespread acclaim as one of the most complete and well-made video game compilations ever created. It also worked as a successful proof-of-concept for the fledgling interactive documentary concept.

"By taking that all the way to the finish line, we were able to kind of work out the structure and the format," says Kohler. "And as we're kind of getting towards the end of Atari 50, it was like, 'Okay, now it's time to take all these learnings that we've had by finishing out Atari 50 and then revisit that back on to Karateka.'"

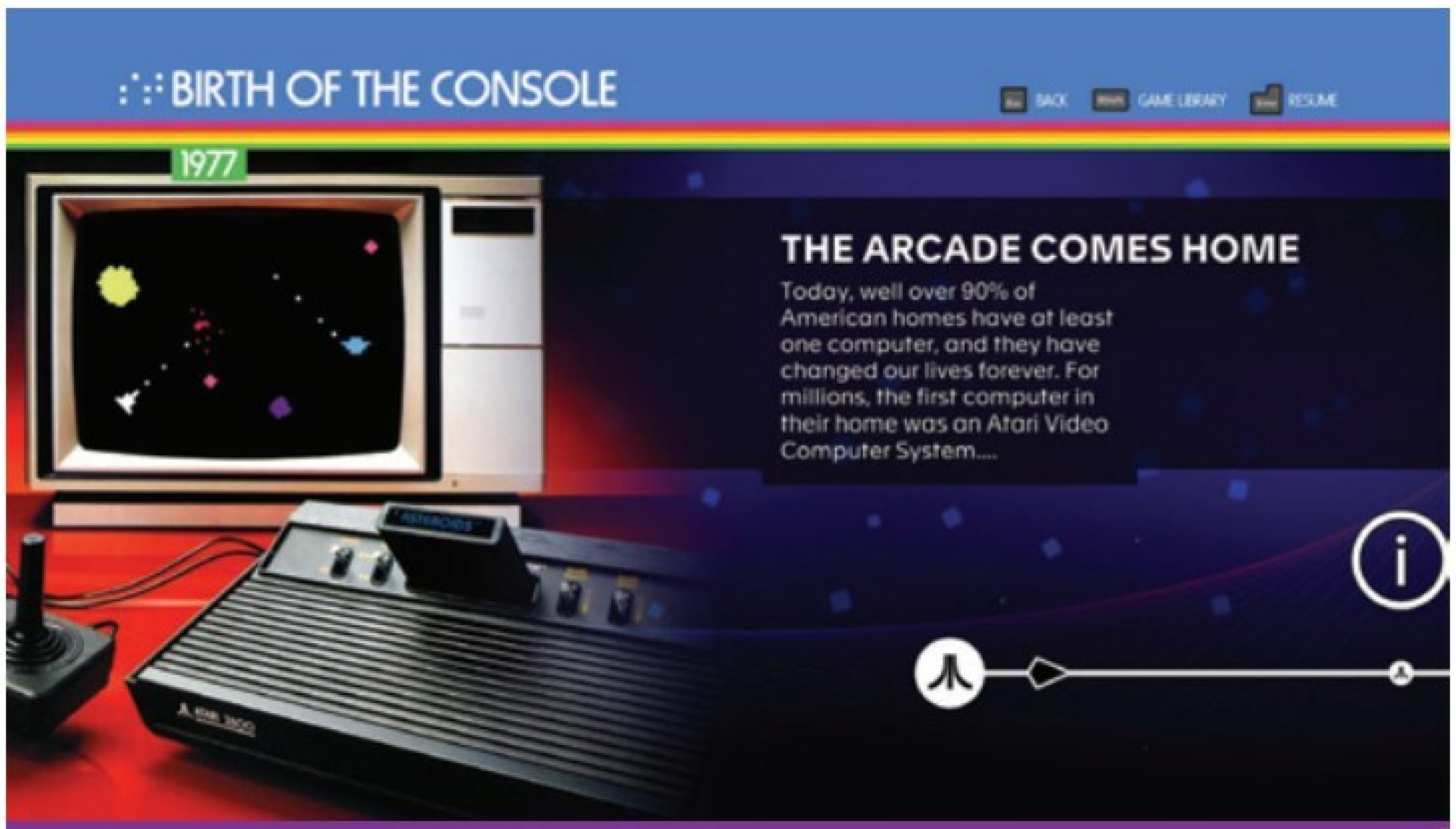
By this time, Digital Eclipse had also signed on with famed UK developer Jeff Minter, creator of hits such as Gridrunner and Tempest 2000, for a title documenting his studio, Llamasoft. Thanks to Atari 50, Digital Eclipse found a winning formula for telling more great stories from video game history. The Gold Master Series was born as a result and The Making of Karateka and Llamasoft adhered to Atari 50's blueprint to tell their respective stories and expand players' appreciation for them.

RESHAPING HISTORY

"Nobody's really doing what we're doing," says Kohler. "And maybe for good reason. Maybe we're crazy, but we're doing our best to try to figure out what this new type of video game is."

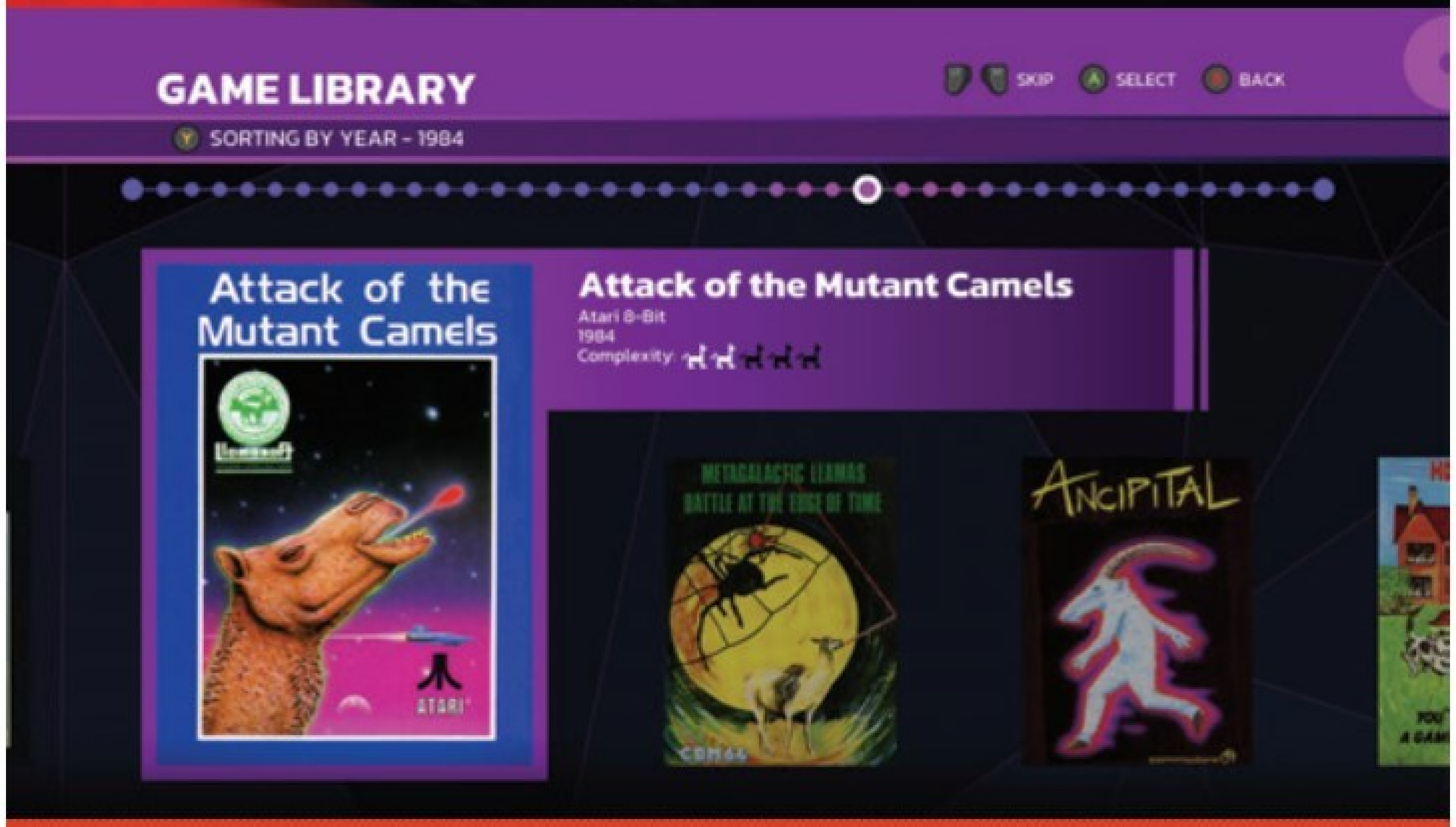
The Gold Master Series team consists of former journalists like Kohler and Dan Amrich, who handle the lion's share of researching and crafting the resulting narratives. The games are made using the Eclipse Engine, proprietary software specially designed to easily ingest emulators, either licensed or developed in-house, to run several old games from a plethora of platforms. The Eclipse Engine is the secret sauce of the Gold Master Series, as its ability to juggle emulators alongside sound and video in a fast and responsive manner is the reason why navigating the games' timelines feels smooth and snappy.

Of course, each game needs a central topic, and everyone at Digital Eclipse, as you might expect, has a personal wishlist of subjects. "I'm still waiting for that call from Shigeru Miyamoto," says Kohler. "He has my number." I found it hard to think that anyone could top Jordan Mechner. His absurdly meticulous note and record keeping (Kohler: "Nobody's that organized! Who does that?!") makes him the gold standard when it comes to providing enough reference material to fill a game. But Kohler tells me that so long as the subject is



THE ARCADE COMES HOME

Today, well over 90% of American homes have at least one computer, and they have changed our lives forever. For millions, the first computer in their home was an Atari Video Computer System....

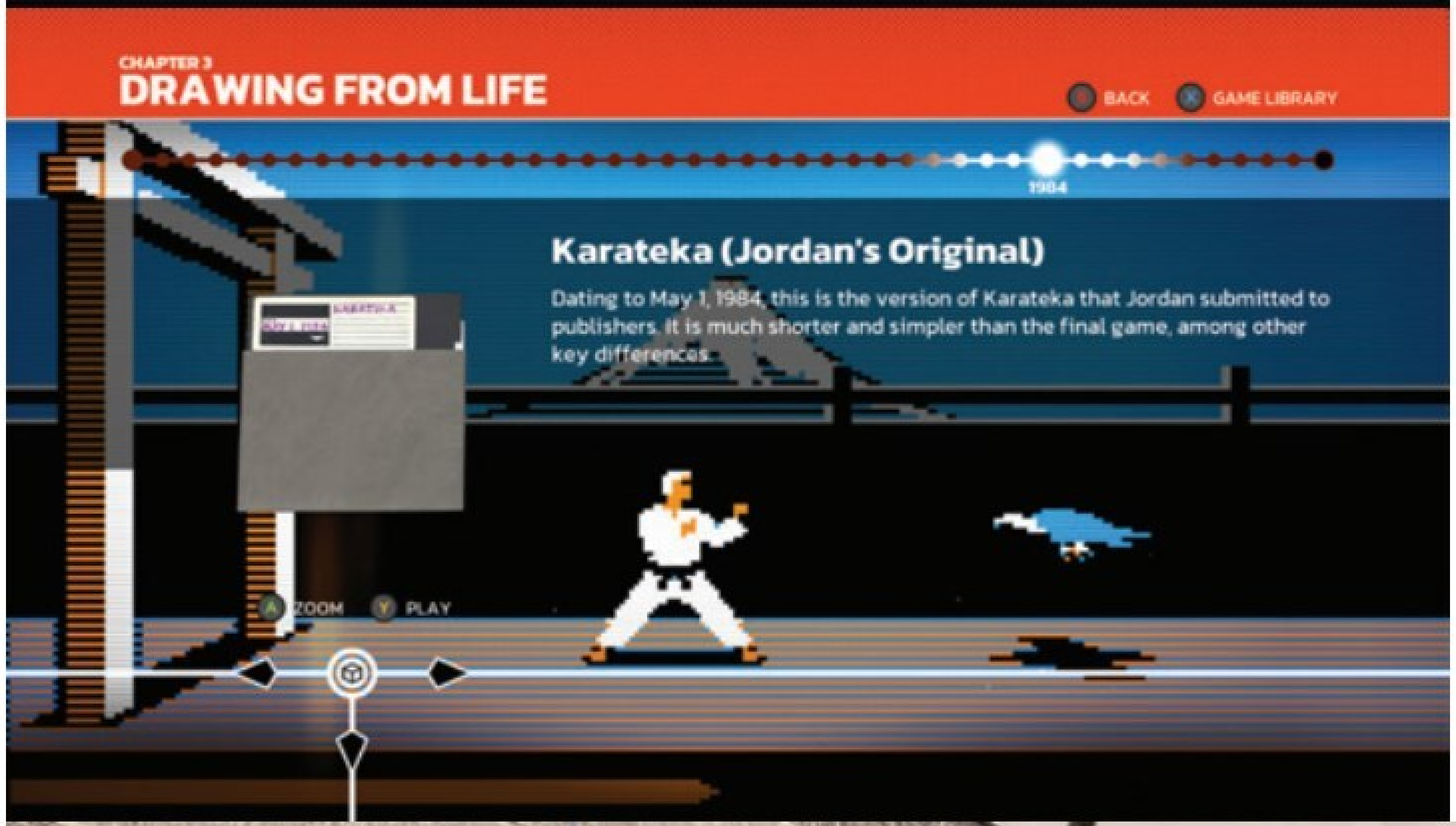

GAME LIBRARY
SKIP
SELECT
BACK
SORTING BY YEAR - 1984
Attack of the Mutant Camels
METAGALACTIC LLAMAS BATTLE AT THE EDGE OF TIME
ANCIPITAL

Attack of the Mutant Camels

Atari 8-Bit

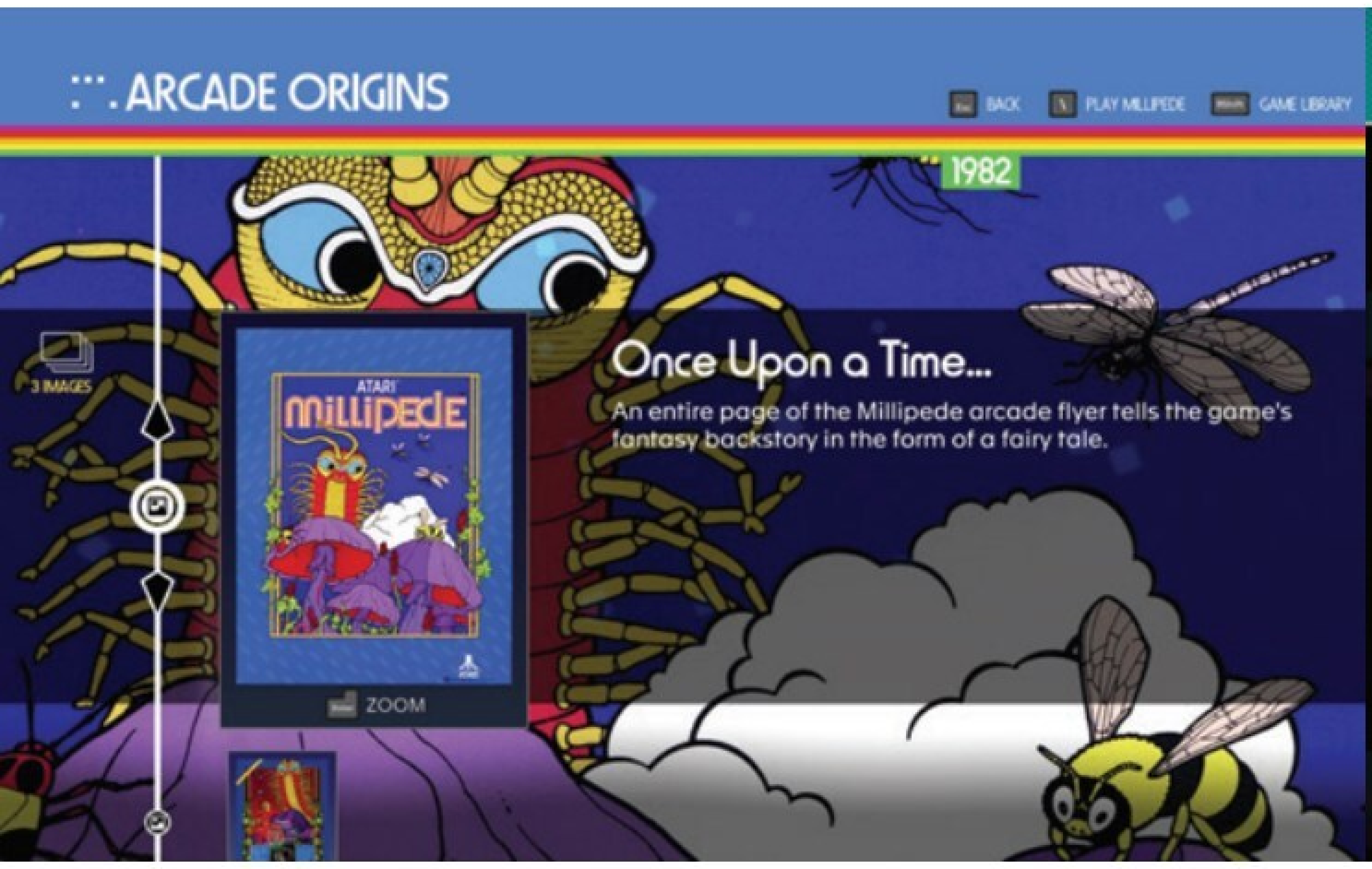
1984

Complexity:

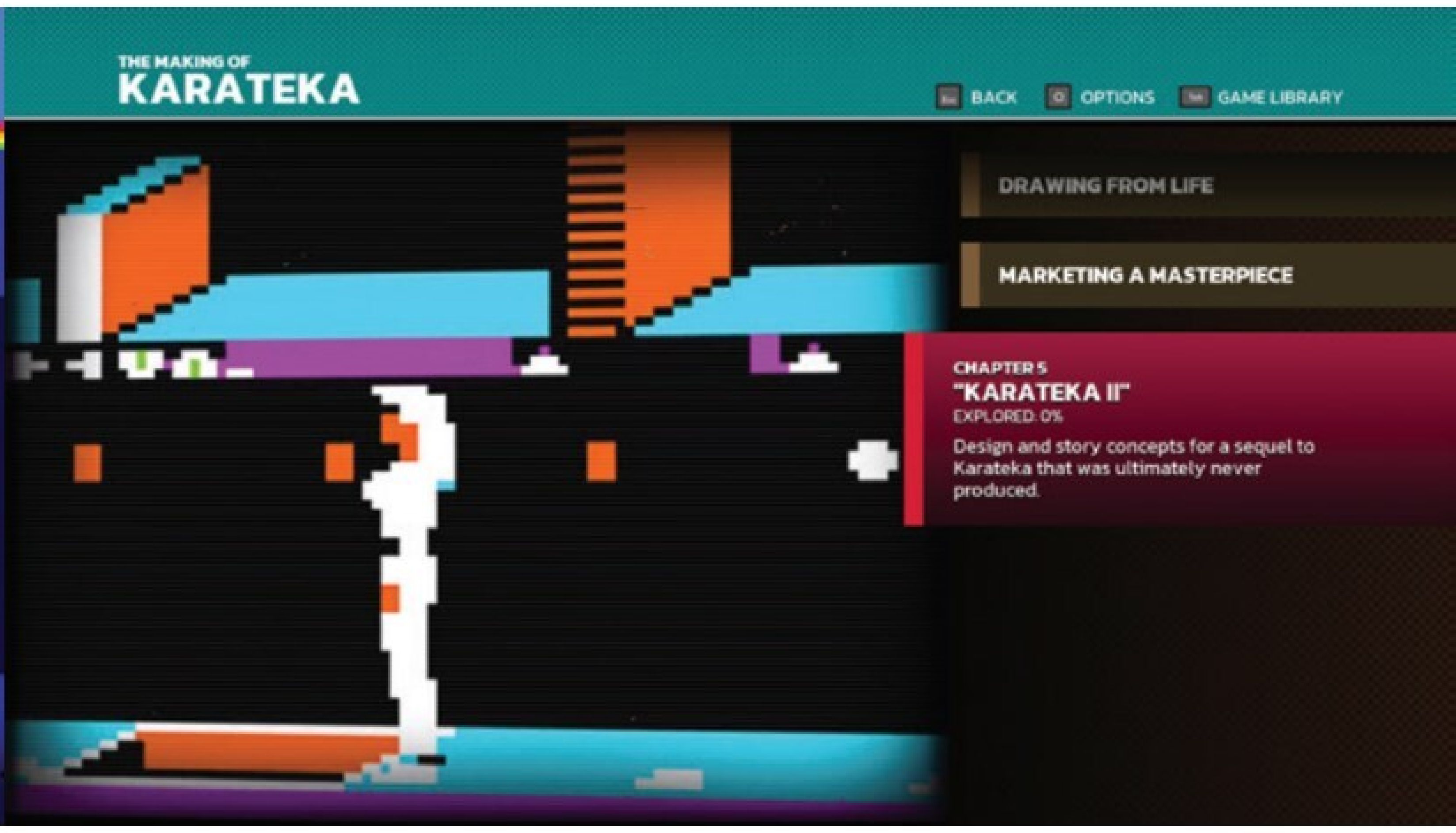


Karateka (Jordan's Original)

Dating to May 1, 1984, this is the version of Karateka that Jordan submitted to publishers. It is much shorter and simpler than the final game, among other key differences.



An entire page of the Millipede arcade flyer tells the game's fantasy backstory in the form of a fairy tale.



Design and story concepts for a sequel to Karateka that was ultimately never produced.

interesting/important, how much they choose to hold on to isn't a prerequisite to be considered for a Gold Master Series game. If Digital Eclipse needs something, one way or another, they'll find it. And whatever they gather will shape the game accordingly. Jeff Minter didn't have as many design documents as Mechner, so Digital Eclipse leaned more into showing what the actual games looked like. Llamasoft includes models of the cassette tapes and advertisements from UK gaming mags at the time. Some materials aren't found until close to the end of production.

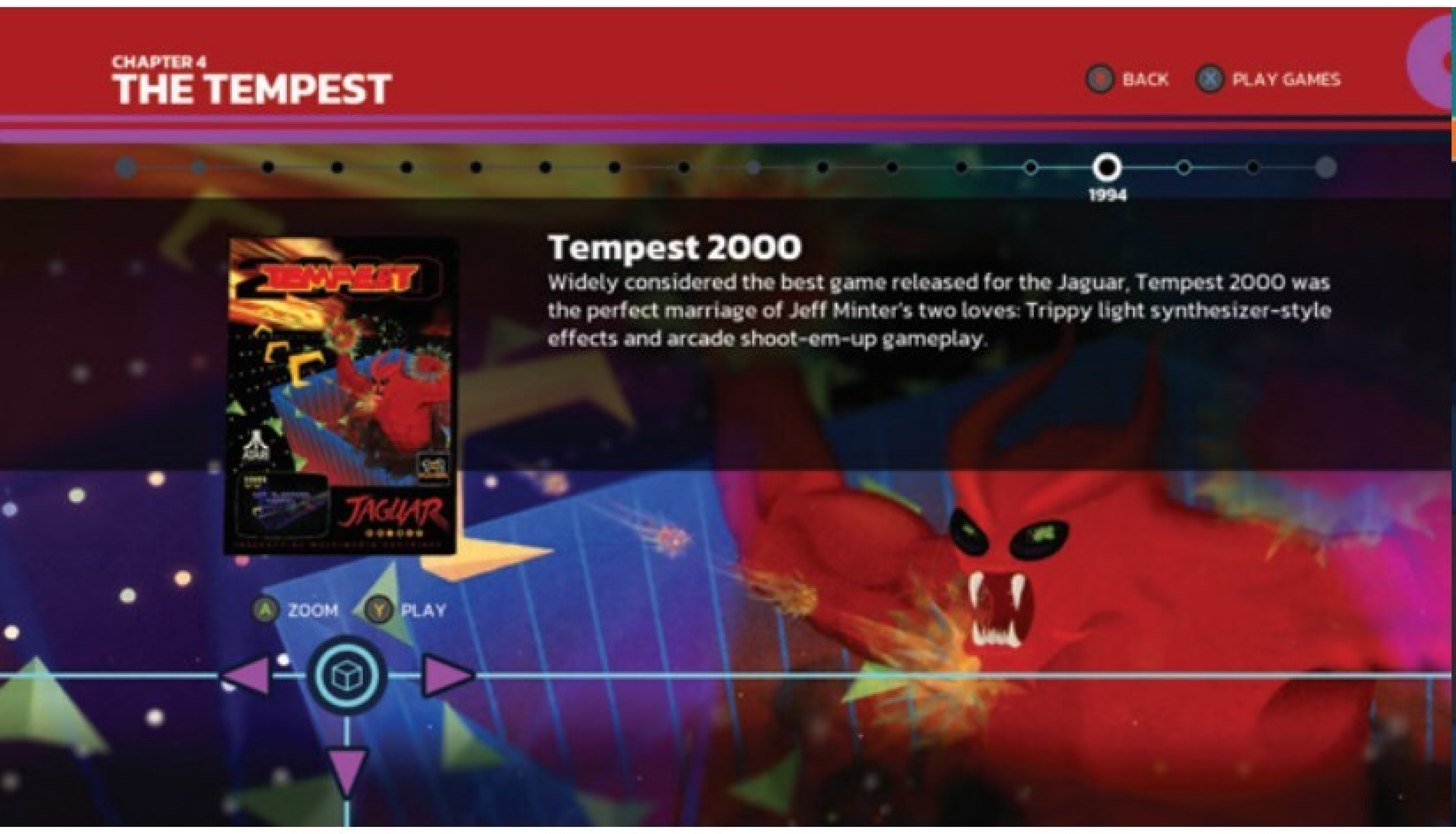
Atari 50, for example, had to be patched to include film footage recorded by a Berkeley University student of Atari back when the company was still called Syzygy. Essentially an amateur documentary capturing the birth of Atari, the footage vanished for decades. While the Atari Museum possessed a copy of the film, Digital Eclipse didn't have the rights to use it. So instead, the studio had to track down one of the students who made it, get their permission to use their footage, research the legal rights for its commercial use, and patch it into Atari 50 after it was already finalized. "We did so much legwork to get that little like, two, three minutes snippet of a film in this," says Kohler.

That effort speaks to the length Digital Eclipse will go to ensure its interactive documentaries are as rich and comprehensive as possible. "We have not had a situation yet where we've wanted to tell a story and have not been able to find cool things to tell that story," Kohler says. "So, I don't think we ever will. I think we can find the things."

The closest comparison I offer for the Gold Master Series is they feel like modern museum exhibits. A museum attendee can breeze through exhibits, giving little more than cursory glances, and walk away with a basic understanding of the history lesson told. Conversely, they can read every card, press every button, and play every video to absorb more details. Kohler says Digital Eclipse wants the Gold Master Series to offer the same range of engagement and that either approach, no matter how shallow or deep, is perfectly okay.

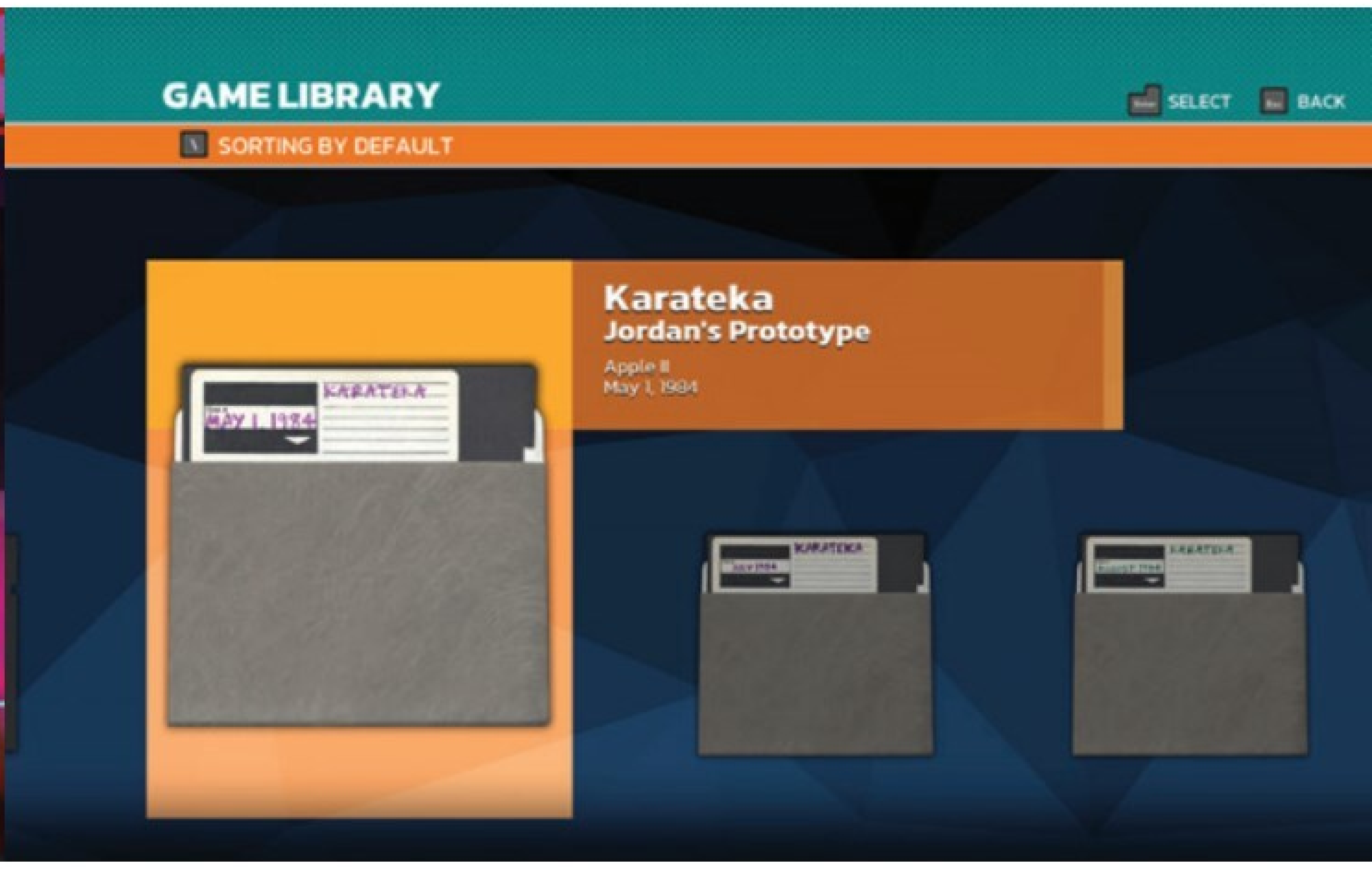
Additionally, Digital Eclipse is always looking for ways to add interactivity beyond just playing an emulated game. One great example is The Making of Karateka's rotoscope theater, where players can watch a short clip of the game while toggling each animation layer, almost like Photoshop filters. In fact, Kohler cites the rotoscope theater as an example of how Digital Eclipse has only scratched the surface of what the interactive documentary can evolve into. That leads to the million-dollar question: Does he consider these types of experiences to be true video games?

'Yes, I think it's a video game," Kohler explains. "I think it's a video game as much as [a] documentary film is a film. And I think that in the same way that filmmakers and film critics back in the '70s kind of started looking at film and saying, 'We should be talking about film by making films about film,' we should be talking about video games by making video games about video games."



Tempest 2000

Widely considered the best game released for the Jaguar, Tempest 2000 was the perfect marriage of Jeff Minter's two loves: Trippy light synthesizer-style effects and arcade shoot-em-up gameplay.



Karateka
Jordan's Prototype
Apple II
May 1, 1984

WRITING THE NEXT CHAPTER

Kohler says Digital Eclipse regularly receives feedback that players unfamiliar or unattached to the subject of the Gold Master Series are less willing to give them a shot. It's a constant challenge to communicate that not only has Digital Eclipse made these games with such people in mind, but you'll likely walk away with a newfound appreciation or even fandom for the games being discussed.

"I think it all goes back to the fact that video games are just such a new medium," he says. "And we're only sort of just scratching the surface of what could be done with that interactive medium."

Despite this, Kohler says he believes that if Digital Eclipse keeps doing the work, eventually, they'll attract enough attention to break through to a wider audience. At the end of the day, he believes people do enjoy being educated, as evidenced by the popularity of more traditional documentary-style programs and podcasts. In his eyes, the Gold Master Series isn't just about teaching – he refers to the term "edutainment" as being "tainted" – but also about bringing more nonfiction into the medium of video games.

The Gold Master Series titles have unintentionally been released at a cadence of one per year (Llamasoft in 2024, Karateka in 2023, and their spiritual predecessor Atari 50 in 2022). Kohler says not to expect this pattern to continue, but the team has various projects in the works. Atari's acquisition of Digital Eclipse in the fall of 2023 has presumably provided a stronger financial safety net, so I only hope we have many more Gold Master Series games to come. And while Kohler is hopeful, he also doesn't want Digital Eclipse to monopolize the genre. He hopes their work creates enough of a demand to inspire other studios to pursue similar projects.

"We should be telling our own stories," he says. "We shouldn't be letting books and films or a Netflix series tell the stories of video games. We should be looking at that ourselves because it's all part of the video game industry needing to treat video games with more respect." ■

Left to right: Battlezone designer Owen Rubin at his controller-laden work station, The Making of Karateka exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ↙

ONE MORE RUN

The Making and Mythology of HADES II

by Marcus Stewart

Bastion. Transistor. Pyre. Hades. Supergiant Games built its name on four distinct, critically lauded titles, giving them a pristine track record few developers can boast. But the thrilling roguelike action of Hades catapulted it above the rest to become the studio's most successful game and biggest mainstream hit. Four years, hundreds of runs, and thousands of hours later, the fanbase still can't get enough of Zagreus' adventure and Supergiant's captivating vision of the Greek Underworld.

They're not alone. The folks at Supergiant felt it still had more stories to tell, more places to explore, more deities to meet, and, most importantly, a new perspective for players to view it all. That enthusiasm inspired the studio to tackle its first sequel, Hades II. With players now taking it through its paces in Steam Early Access, we visited Supergiant Games to learn how it came to be and what to expect as it evolves over the coming months.

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Supergiant Games
DEVELOPER Supergiant Games **RELEASE** May 6 (PC Early Access)

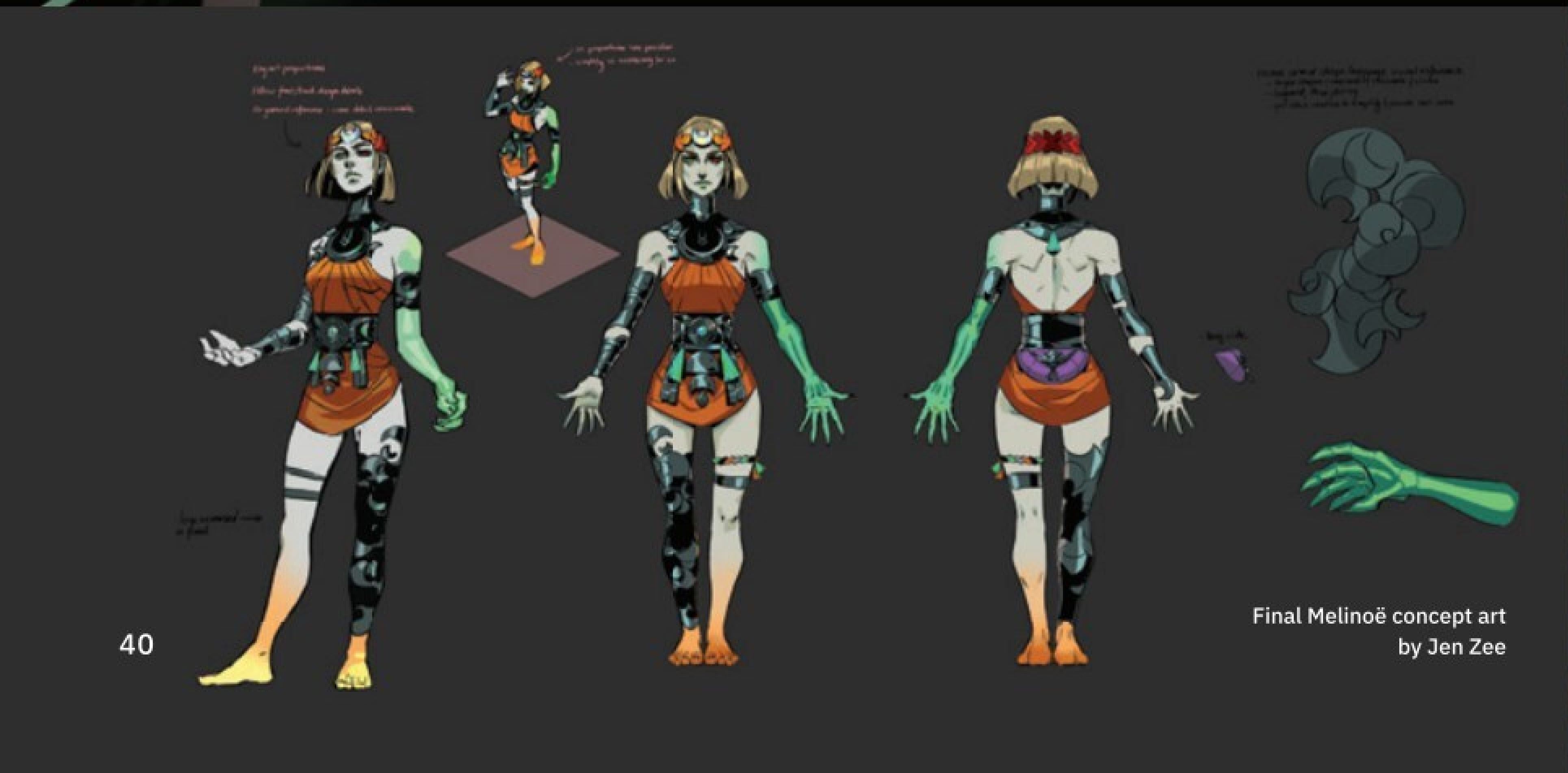
LOOKING BACK AND MOVING AHEAD

Creative director Greg Kasavin declares Hades as "our most successful game by any sort of measure." A litany of industry awards, strong sales, and a passionate fan following have backed up this claim, earning Hades a place among the gods. Yet despite this overwhelming success, Supergiant remains the same as it ever was: a small team (currently 25 full-time employees) driven by a passion and enthusiasm to create unforgettable experiences that stay true to their personal tastes and interests.

When it came time to decide what the next project would be, they approached it as they always do by asking one question: what idea excites them the most? Knowing that they'll be spending the next several years of their lives working on it, making sure the game captures the team's collective passion ensures the best execution and, ultimately, the strongest product. Though it weighed various pitches and ideas, Supergiant had already recognized the potential to expand Hades' world even during the first game's development.

"There are so many characters from Greek myth that we're very excited about that simply didn't have a place in the story of the original game," says Kasavin. "You've got these really big names like Apollo or Heracles and stuff like that. And they don't appear in the original Hades, not because we weren't excited for them, [but] just because we were focused on other characters... But we always wondered: how would we portray some of these other characters?"

Greg and the rest of the team soon realized it had much more it wanted to say with Hades.



Final Melinoë concept art by Jen Zee

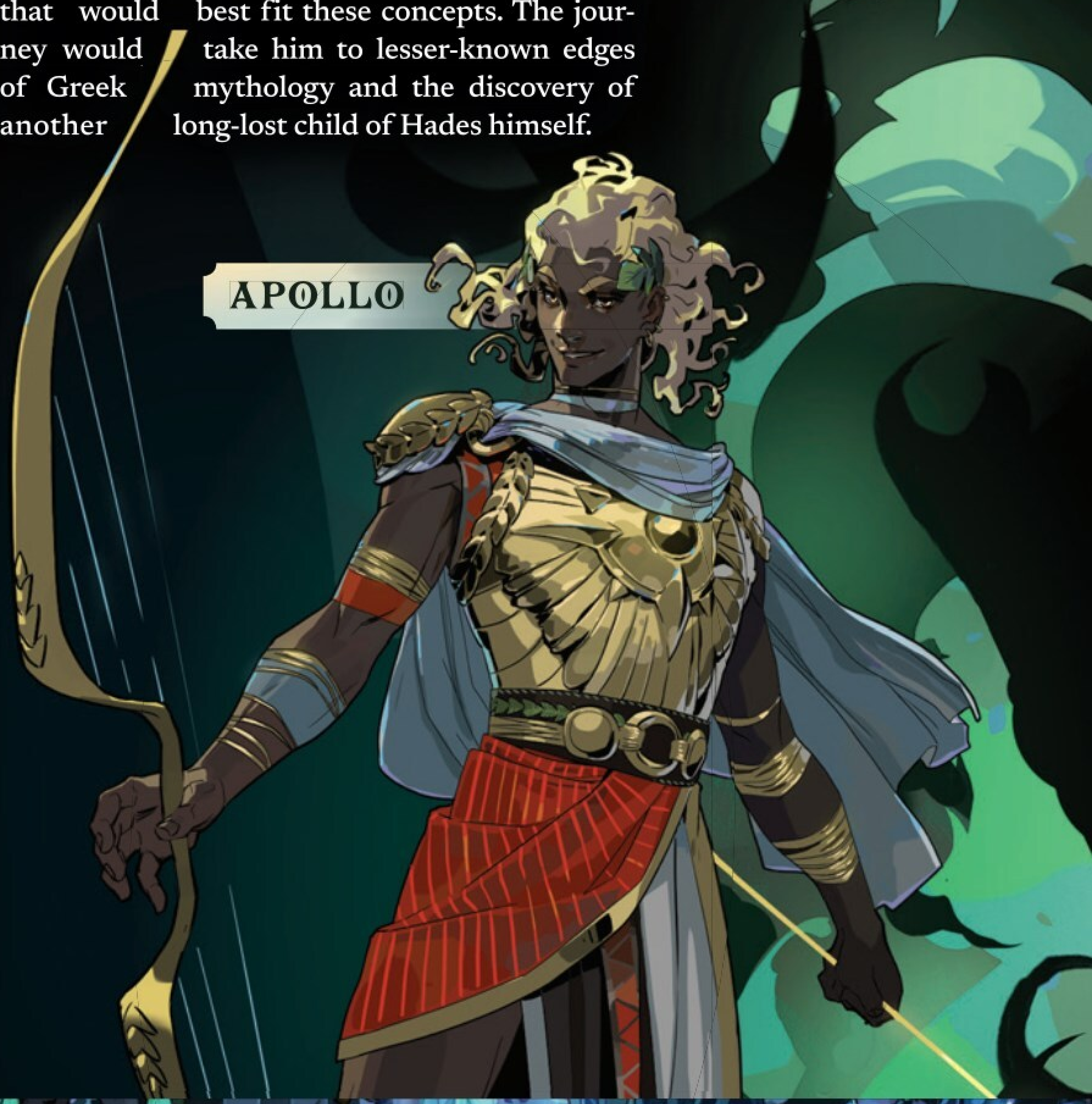
Speaking with five of the original seven employees who have been with Supergiant Games since the development of 2011's Bastion – Kasavin, studio director Amir Rao, art director Jen Zee, composer Darren Korb, and voice actor Logan Cunningham – all of them expressed excitement about returning to Hades' world for their own respective reasons.

For Kasavin, Greek mythology's rich and expansive lore offers a multitude of storytelling possibilities. For Zee, the principal artist behind Supergiant's signature art style, redesigning beloved characters was as exciting as illustrating new ones. Korb looks forward to adding new thematic and tonal layers to Hades' existing soundscape that exemplifies the new presentational direction for the sequel. Cunningham, the voice behind several key characters, including Hades himself, teases a new direction for the ruler of the underworld.

For Rao, however, he tells me this is the studio's opportunity to define, in their eyes, what a sequel looks like. Supergiant has been a one-and-done studio since its inception, to the point that some fans believe the studio has some sort of policy against making sequels. Kasavin says this has never been the case. Rather, the reluctance came from the studio's desire always to surprise players; sequels are known quantities. At the same time, the idea of making a sequel at a conceptual level became an alluring challenge in itself.

"We made four original IPs in a row," says Rao. "We are unpracticed at making a sequel [laughs]. So, this is our first time doing it. We had to reflect on what are some of the sequels that we loved? And what did they do to move the game world and mechanics and design and story forward?

To that end, Supergiant examined the team's favorite sequels that expanded on their predecessors in meaningful and dramatic ways while still retaining the elements that had worked before. Rao cites Portal 2 as an example, and he also names Diablo II as a personal inspiration, particularly his love for the magic-based sorceress class – a specific trait that would later prove a vital ingredient. As the team decided on ideas and priorities, Greg formulated the story and lore that would best fit these concepts. The journey would take him to lesser-known edges of Greek mythology and the discovery of another long-lost child of Hades himself.



CREATING A NEW MYTH

While unpacking the core pillars of what makes a Hades game – fast-paced action and an engaging roguelike loop wrapped around an evolving narrative – Supergiant determined one thing early on: it didn't need to star Zagreus. Hades is about the Underworld first and foremost, and as popular as Hades' rebellious son was, Kasavin felt his story had been told as completely as it could be across the dozens (or hundreds) of hours players spent with him.

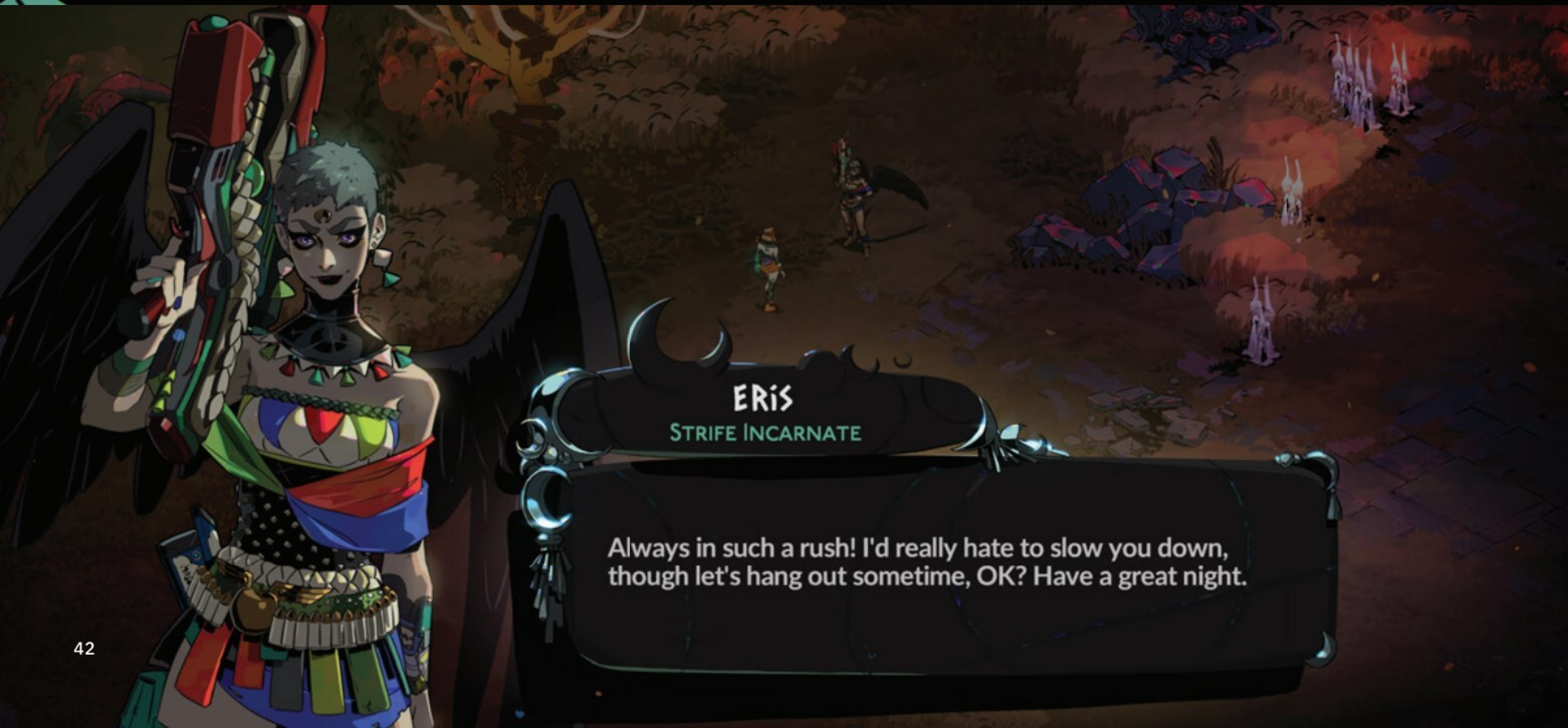
"There was never a version of Hades II that was going to be centered on Zagreus," says Kasavin. "I don't think we would have gone for that."

Plus, what better way to shake up the sequel than to present a totally new perspective? That would negate the inherent familiarity of a sequel by letting players see the world in a brand-new way. Kasavin began researching other aspects of Greek myth, which led him to the Orphic Hymns. This ancient collection of 87 poems is one of the few surviving written works of Orphism, a fringe mythology worshipped by religious cultists centered on Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, fertility, and theater, among other things. He eventually encountered a hymn centered on Melinoë, the daughter of Hades and Persephone (read the sidebar to learn more).

Like Zagreus, another obscure figure of Greek myth, no one at Supergiant had ever heard of Melinoë. Very few details about her exist, but her familial ties to the god of the Underworld and the fact that she isn't mentioned at all in the first game presented an exciting opportunity. Moreover, Melinoë is also described as a witch, allowing Supergiant to explore the more occult side of Greek mythology. This thematic shift meant it could fold in characters such as Hecate, the goddess of magic and Melinoë's mentor. Hecate's a significant figure, and Kasavin says she was too big and too powerful to merely be a bit player in Hades 1. As such, expect her to play an essential role in Hades II's events.

The story of Hades II unfolds following a significant passage of time after the first game's conclusion. Though a direct sequel, Kasavin also views Hades II as a standalone story and says players won't have to be familiar with the previous game's events to jump in. That's because Zagreus, Hades, and Persephone are absent, evidently befalling some terrible fate caused by the arrival of the game's main antagonist: Chronos, the Titan of Time and father of Hades. He's escaped his prison in Tartarus to wreak havoc not only on the Underworld but on Olympus as well. But Melinoë has a personal stake in avenging her family despite having never known them. She keeps a portrait of Hades, Persephone, and Zagreus lovingly surrounding her as a newborn and regularly laments their loss.

Melinoë was adopted, raised, and trained by Hecate in The Crossroads, a bog-like area that, as the name implies, serves as the midpoint between the surface and the Underworld. It's also home to a resistance movement against Chronos led by Hecate. Players are thrown right into the middle of things when they meet Melinoë, and toppling the usurper to her father's throne, as well as reuniting with her family, serves as the primary story hooks in this mythological revenge quest.



Always in such a rush! I'd really hate to slow you down, though let's hang out sometime, OK? Have a great night.

“DEATH TO CHRONOS”

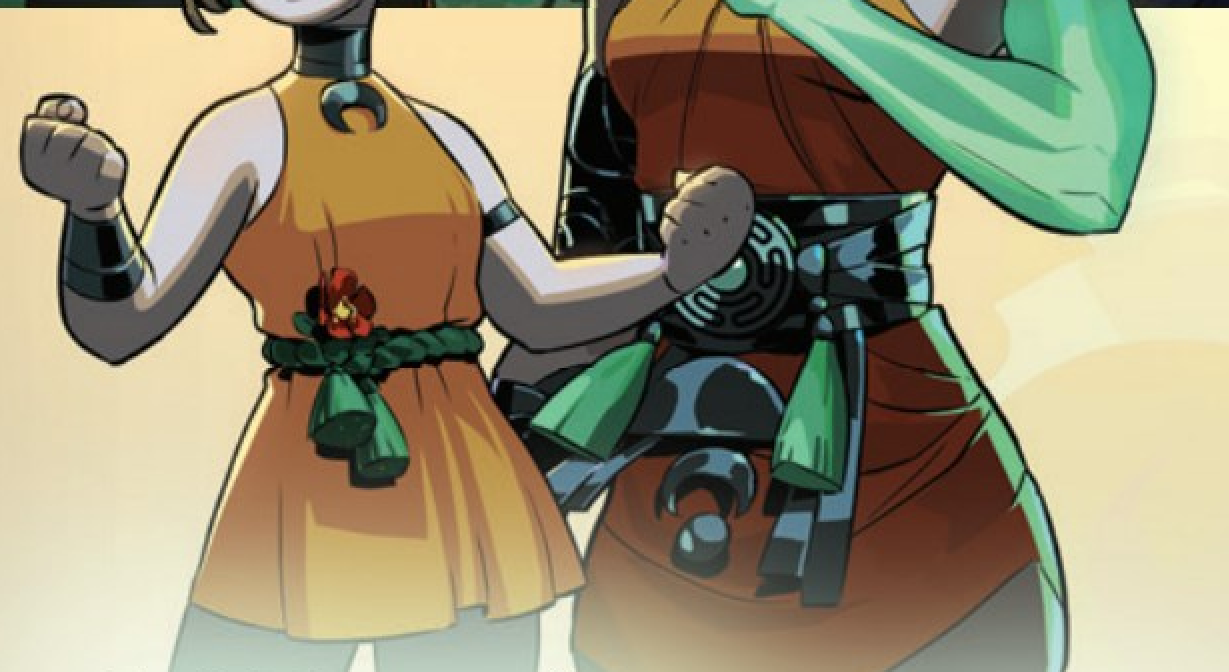
Many fans consider the first Hades as one of, if not the best, roguelikes ever made, and the team credits the feedback-driven iteration of its Early Access period for that. So much so that conceptualizing Hades II was less about addressing weak points and more about adding new twists while expanding its winning elements.

“At the risk of angering the gods with my hubris and arrogance, there aren’t things that I look back at with the original Hades and go, ‘Gosh, darn it, we just really fell short on that,’” says Kasavin.

Combat is one of Hades’ strongest aspects, and with Melinoë as the epicenter for all of Hades II’s changes, it allowed Supergiant to concoct a fresh spin on the action. Zagreus was a straight-ahead warrior/fighter archetype who utlized more physical weaponry. Melinoë, on the other hand, is a caster that falls more into the witch/necromancer/assassin camps. Her weapons embody these traits best, such as the Witch’s Staff, her starter weapon, which she thrusts forward to deliver powerful blasts that feel similar to the ranged assault of a spear. Another weapon, the Umbral Flames, is a pair of torches that fire ghostly skulls. Melinoë’s melee weapons include the quick-slicing sickle and dagger combo of the Sister Blades and the weighty and deliberate Moonstone Axe.

Sorceress-esque combat isn’t typically known as the snappiest style of combat in some games, but the moment-to-moment action retains the familiar tightness while also feeling distinctly different. Like Zagreus, she can utilize a projectile-based special move and can also conjure a spell circle to ensnare and, if fully charged, damage multiple targets.

Melinoë can only do so much on her own, though, so she’ll enlist the aid of the gods via a fresh roster of boons. Nearly all the returning gods’ boons are different this time to fit Melinoë’s unique skill set. Expect to encounter familiar gods like Zeus, Poseidon, and Aphrodite.



Who is MELINOË?

Melinoë, like Zagreus, isn’t well known even among those with an above-average familiarity with Greek mythology. In Orphic literature, she’s described as a “saffron-cloaked nymph of the earth” conceived by Persephone and Hades (or Zeus, depending on the interpretation) at the banks of the Underworld’s Kokytos river, which appears in Hades II.

She’s the goddess of nightmares and madness, said to bring night terrors to mortals when she roamed the Earth. She’s also known as a practitioner of witchcraft, which plays heavily into her gameplay style and the more occult themes of Hades II.

Kasavin describes Melinoë’s personality in Hades II as “precise” and “critical” in contrast to Zagreus’ more laid-back demeanor. Whereas Zagreus adopted more of Persephone’s traits, Melinoë, unbeknownst to her, behaves more closely to her father, Hades. She’s more disciplined and calculating but also possesses warmth and respect for her allies in The Crossroads. She misses the family she never knew but possesses a deep affection for her adopted home. Thus, unlike Zagreus, she seeks to defend her home rather than escape it.

Few known visual representations of Melinoë exist, which gave Jen Zee and the art team leeway to play around with her design. Her appearance incorporates written descriptions while embodying Supergiants’ own lore elements. Her dual-colored eyes (inverted from Zagreus’, interestingly) and flaming feet/laurels illustrate her family relation. Melinoë is also associated with the moon, and this is most prominently showcased by her crescent headpiece and similar symbols adorning her attire.

Melinoë’s most striking attribute is her transparent left arm, the backstory of which Supergiant is keeping under wraps. Some fans have postulated it’s a nod to Melinoë’s classical description of appearing half white and half black to represent her ties to Zeus and Hades. Her arm may also represent her power over spirits because it shares the same green hue as the many ghostly shades occupying the Underworld.

While it's still fun to push back foes using the watery might of Poseidon or debilitate enemies with Aphrodite's curse, I was most excited to see what blessings the new gods would bring.

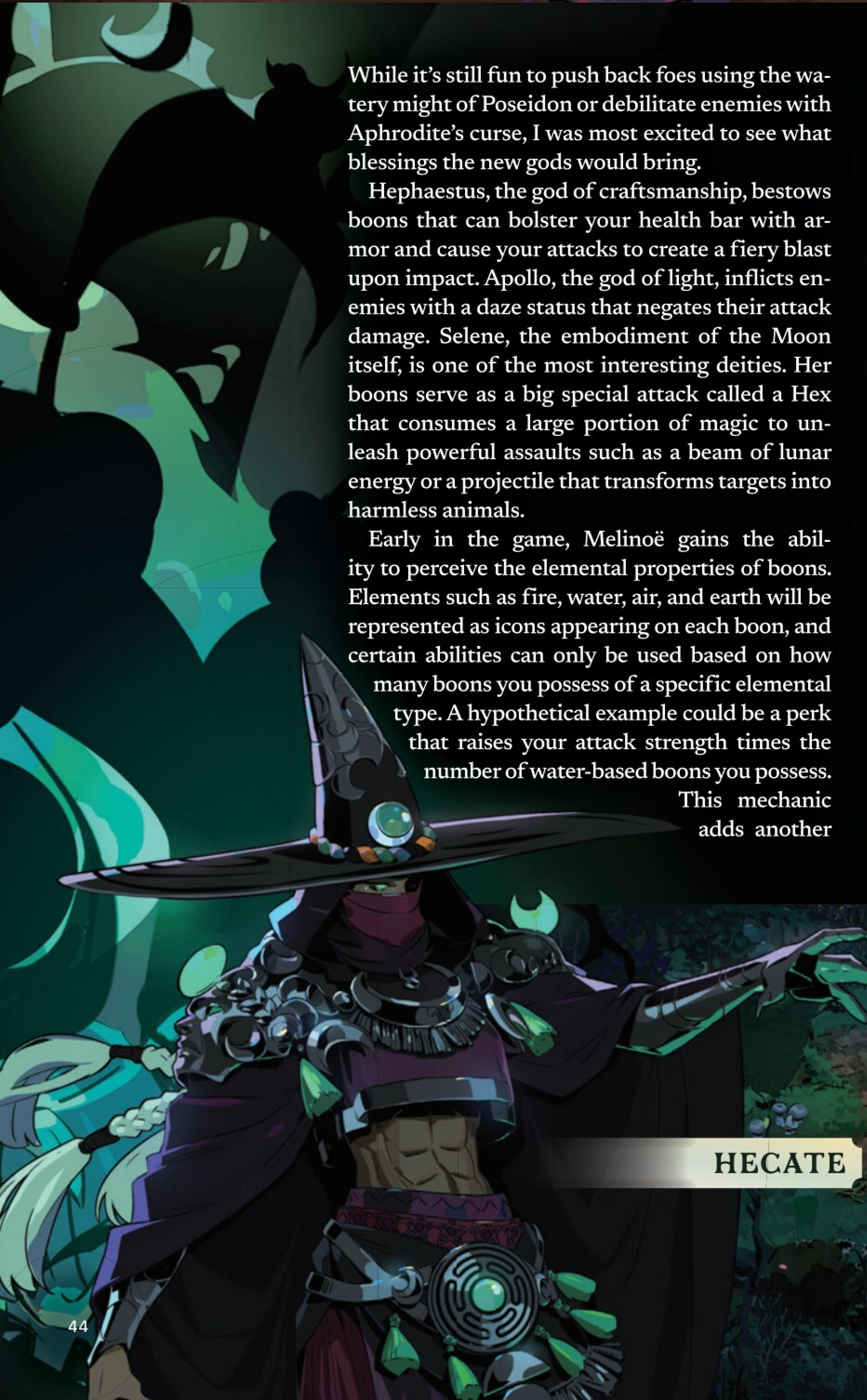
Hephaestus, the god of craftsmanship, bestows boons that can bolster your health bar with armor and cause your attacks to create a fiery blast upon impact. Apollo, the god of light, inflicts enemies with a daze status that negates their attack damage. Selene, the embodiment of the Moon itself, is one of the most interesting deities. Her boons serve as a big special attack called a Hex that consumes a large portion of magic to unleash powerful assaults such as a beam of lunar energy or a projectile that transforms targets into harmless animals.

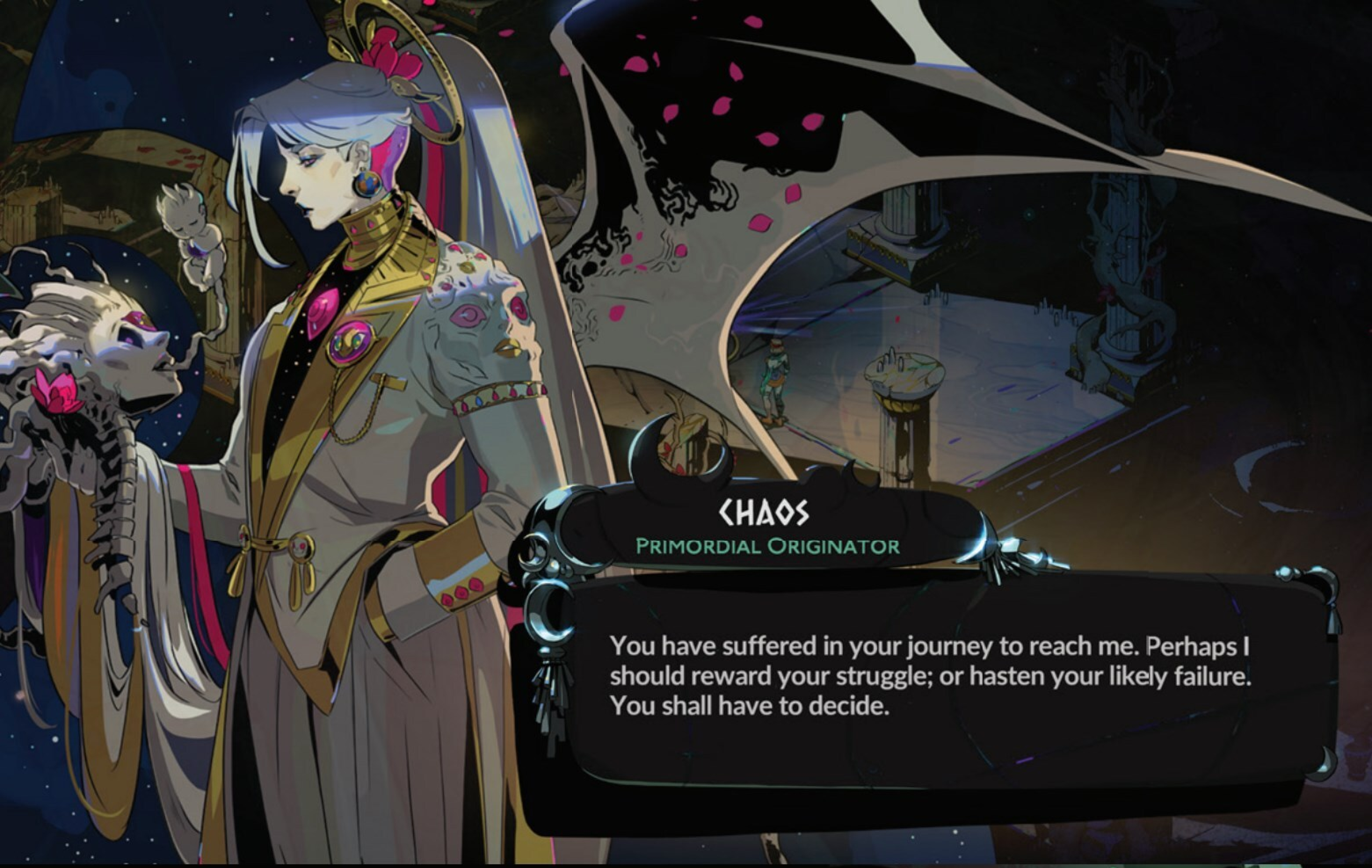
Early in the game, Melinoë gains the ability to perceive the elemental properties of boons. Elements such as fire, water, air, and earth will be represented as icons appearing on each boon, and certain abilities can only be used based on how many boons you possess of a specific elemental type. A hypothetical example could be a perk that raises your attack strength times the number of water-based boons you possess. This mechanic adds another layer of thought and strategy behind choosing a god's blessing; you may have to decline a useful skill of a different elemental type in order to chase a greater ability tied to the elements you already have. And since you don't know when a god will appear again, the long-term investment becomes a risky proposition.

"You're trading some of that power in the immediate moment for the possibility of power down the line," says Kasavin.

Slaying monsters isn't the only thing keeping Melinoë busy during runs. She can also gather resources, such as picking a variety of special flowers that appear in some arenas. For more heavy-duty harvesting, players can unlock new tools, such as a pickaxe to mine ores like silver and limestone. Another tool is a tablet that lets Melinoë compel certain spirits into giving special ingredients. A fishing rod lets her catch fish in certain spots. The catch is that you can only choose to carry one tool at a time. That means you'll have to dedicate runs around gathering a desired resource in order to unlock additional weapons and more.

Between runs, players can toss collected resources into Hecate's bubbling cauldron to perform incantations, which serve as quality-of-life upgrades for





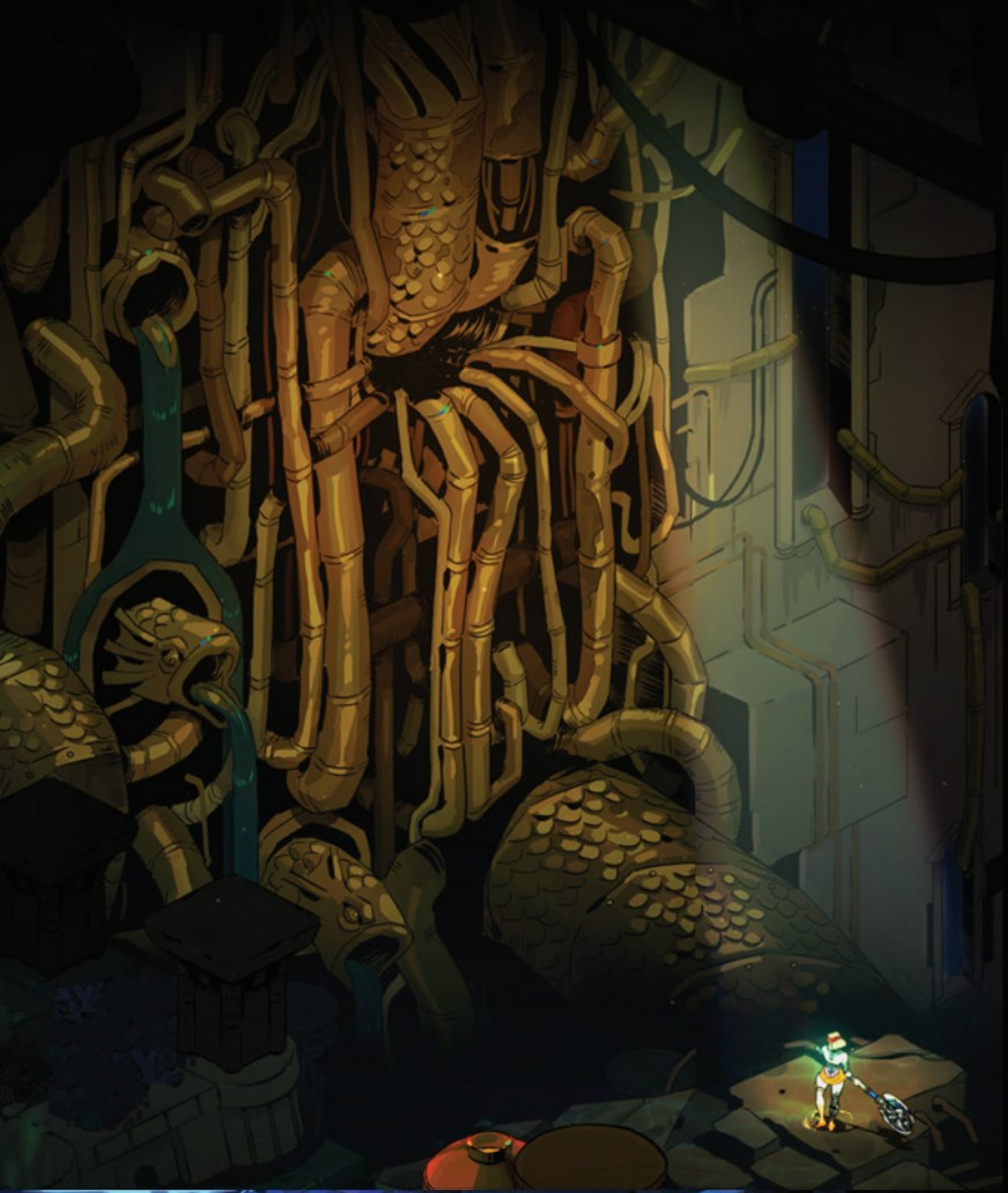
You have suffered in your journey to reach me. Perhaps I should reward your struggle; or hasten your likely failure. You shall have to decide.

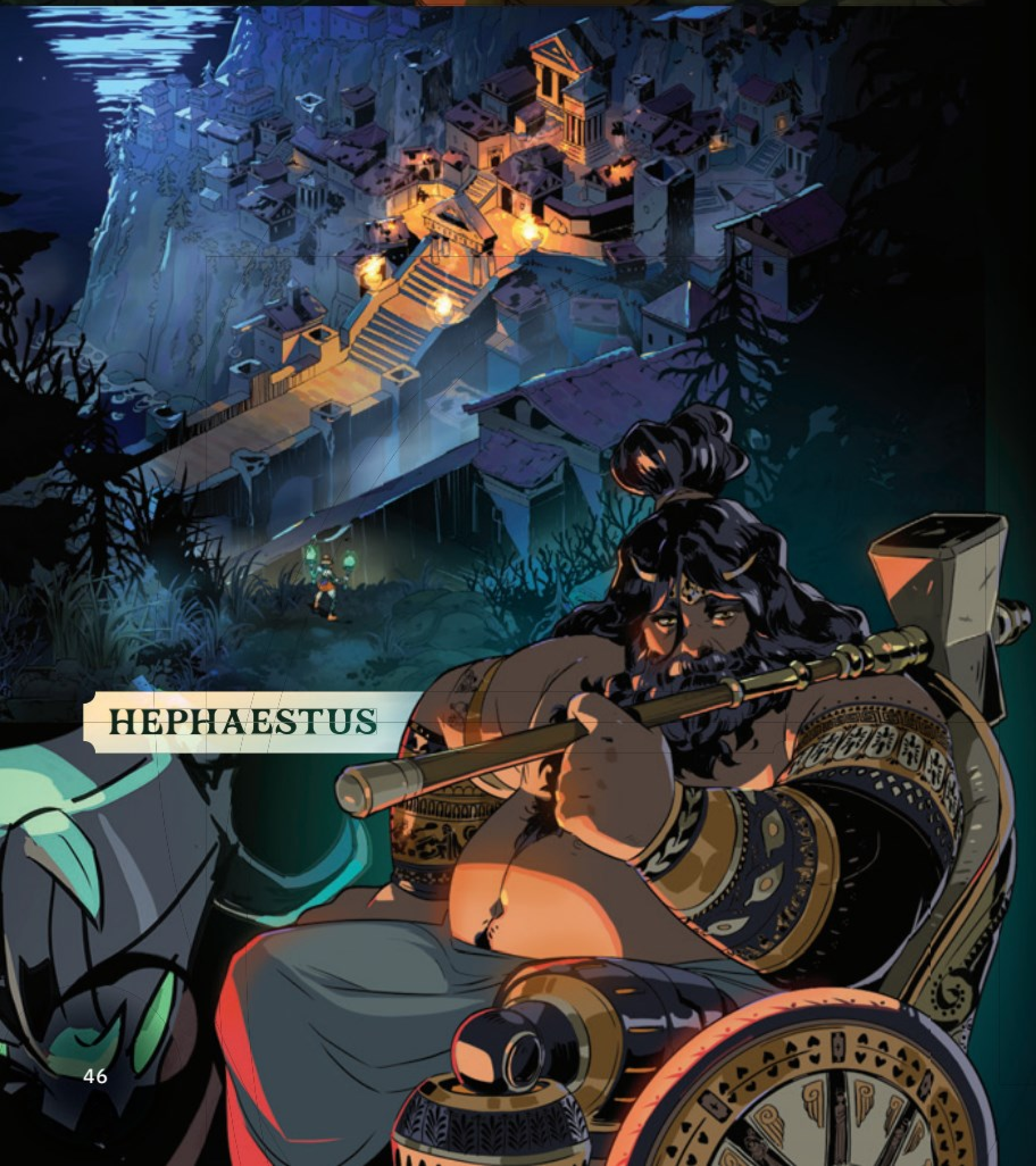
Melinoë and the Crossroads. This includes summoning the Wretched Broker's shop or adding a garden plot to plant seeds to grow flowers at home. Melinoë can gain perks such as getting alerts to valuable resources after encounters so you don't miss them, the ability to view recipe incantation recipes during runs, and beckoning the Fates themselves for help – a request they may or may not oblige.

Resource-collecting feeds into a word Kasavin continues to repeat regarding the design of Hades II: Intentionality. Supergiant noticed the more people played Hades, the more they began chasing personal goals beyond the main objective of escaping. Players would dedicate runs to advancing smaller plotlines like Achilles and Patroclus' storyline or work towards maxing out the relationships with the gods. The game never forces these tasks upon players, but they pursue them anyway. Supergiant saw this as an opportunity to present more supplementary tasks to help add purpose to runs beyond just killing what's in front of you.

Players can further improve Melinoë's capabilities at the Altar of Ashes. Like the Mirror Of Night in Hades 1, the Altar of Ashes allows players to spend ashes, a currency awarded by certain rooms, to unlock special passive abilities. These skills take the form of tarot-style Arcana cards; unlocking one card reveals a new, adjacent card. Arcana cards bestow perks such as the fan-favorite Death Defiance, where players can survive a killing blow one time, small health or magic regen when entering a room, and more. Melinoë can only have so many card abilities active simultaneously, however. A meter called Grasp of the Arcana dictates this limit. Every Arcana card consumes a certain number of bars on this meter, called Grasp. If the meter has 10 bars, equipping three cards that consume 5, 3, and 2 Grasp would max it out. By spending a large amount of Psyche, another resource obtained during runs, you can increase the limit of your Grasp meter. Kasavin compares this system to managing Functions in Transistor, forcing players to pick as few or as many cards as necessary to create varied, specialized builds of Melinoë.

"We're very excited for the potential that brings," says Kasavin. "When you combine it with the different weapons, different boons, keepsakes, it all leads to more ways to play through the game. And what we're looking for is for there to be that high range of possibility whenever you play so that you're always like, 'Oh, what if I try this, or what if I go about it this way?' If there's so many of those possibilities, it keeps the game fresh for the longest amount of time."





GO YOUR OWN WAY

From an aesthetic standpoint, art director Jen Zee teases that the main biomes of Hades II will be unlike anything fans have ever seen in a Supergiant title. We've seen the enchanted bog of the Crossroads and the moonlit forest of Erebus, and the subsequent dramatic contrast of the steam-powered pipeworks of Oceanus, the second major zone. Navigating each world is a visual delight, and utilizing environmental hazards, such as triggering water-blasting traps or area-of-effect steam blasts in Oceanus, allows for thoughtful use of the surroundings in battle.

Running from one area to the next also features more emergent storytelling moments. For example, Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, appears seemingly at random during certain fights to lend a hand by blasting foes with her bow and marking them for Melinoë to take down (before offering her services via a traditional boon). She's not the only character to make surprise appearances like this, and while I won't spoil the others we've witnessed, these visits can unfold in surprising ways beyond mere pleasantries.

Kasavin states that the team identified early on that Hades 1's structure remained static: you start in Tarturus, work your way through Asphodel and Elysium before reaching the Temple of Styx, battling the same bosses along the way. While that worked, the best moments of the game were occasions when you'd go off the beaten path to shoot the breeze with characters like Eurydice and catch up on her personal drama, or listen to tailored dialogue from bosses referencing your last encounter. Hades II presents an opportunity to mix things up and provide more agency into how players can approach advancing the adventure. That's why the game features not just one route but two.

Players may have noticed a locked staircase situated across the entrance of the initial route (dubbed the Underworld route). Supergiant confirms that relatively early on, players will unlock a completely new route consisting of four different areas and four different bosses, effectively meaning Hades II is at least twice the size of the original.

We won't spoil where the second path takes Melinoë, but once it becomes available, players are free to pursue whichever course they see fit. In addition to housing its own roster of enemies and bosses, you'll also meet characters that don't appear in the opposite route. This opens up additional plot threads players can intentionally choose to pursue at the expense of neglecting the other route for a period of time. And once you do decide to explore a path you've abandoned for a while, the characters there may ask where you've been all that time. Other times, a character available on one path may ask Melinoë to interact with someone on the opposite route. Like the first game, Hades II's writing and storytelling are highly reactive to the player's actions.

"And for us, that's where so much of the magic of the game can be," says Kasavin. "Where it really feels like it's your own story unfolding. You're not being led by the nose through a linear narrative. Of course, the narrative moments are individually crafted, but there are enough of them, and they're reactive enough to where it just feels highly specific to whatever is going on."

Kasavin doesn't want to give too much away about how the main narrative unfolds as a result of juggling the two paths. He's especially coy when I ask how the two paths' storytelling variance affects the ending or if there are even multiple conclusions, only stating that Supergiant has not yet crafted the finale but that "we know where we want it to go." However, he does say not to expect some vast network of ending permutations à la Pyre.

Story implications aside, the dual path approach will also help alleviate the frustration of feeling stuck when players hit a particular roadblock on a given path, chiefly a challenging boss fight. As one of the few unskippable elements of Hades, failing to conquer a boss (like, say, Theseus and the Minotaur in the first game) meant having to do little more than bang your head against that battle until you succeeded. Now, if players can't overcome a boss, they can take a break and pursue the other route to perhaps gain more headway there in the meantime. And speaking of the bosses, expect them to offer challenging exams of your skills and to evolve their tactics over time as you repeatedly encounter them.

Creating the SOUND

Darren Korb is Supergiant's famed composer and voice director responsible for recording each of their games' exceptional soundtracks (he also voiced Zagreus and Skelly). Hades II presented the unique opportunity to revisit his work for the first time and expand on it, a prospect he enthusiastically embraced.

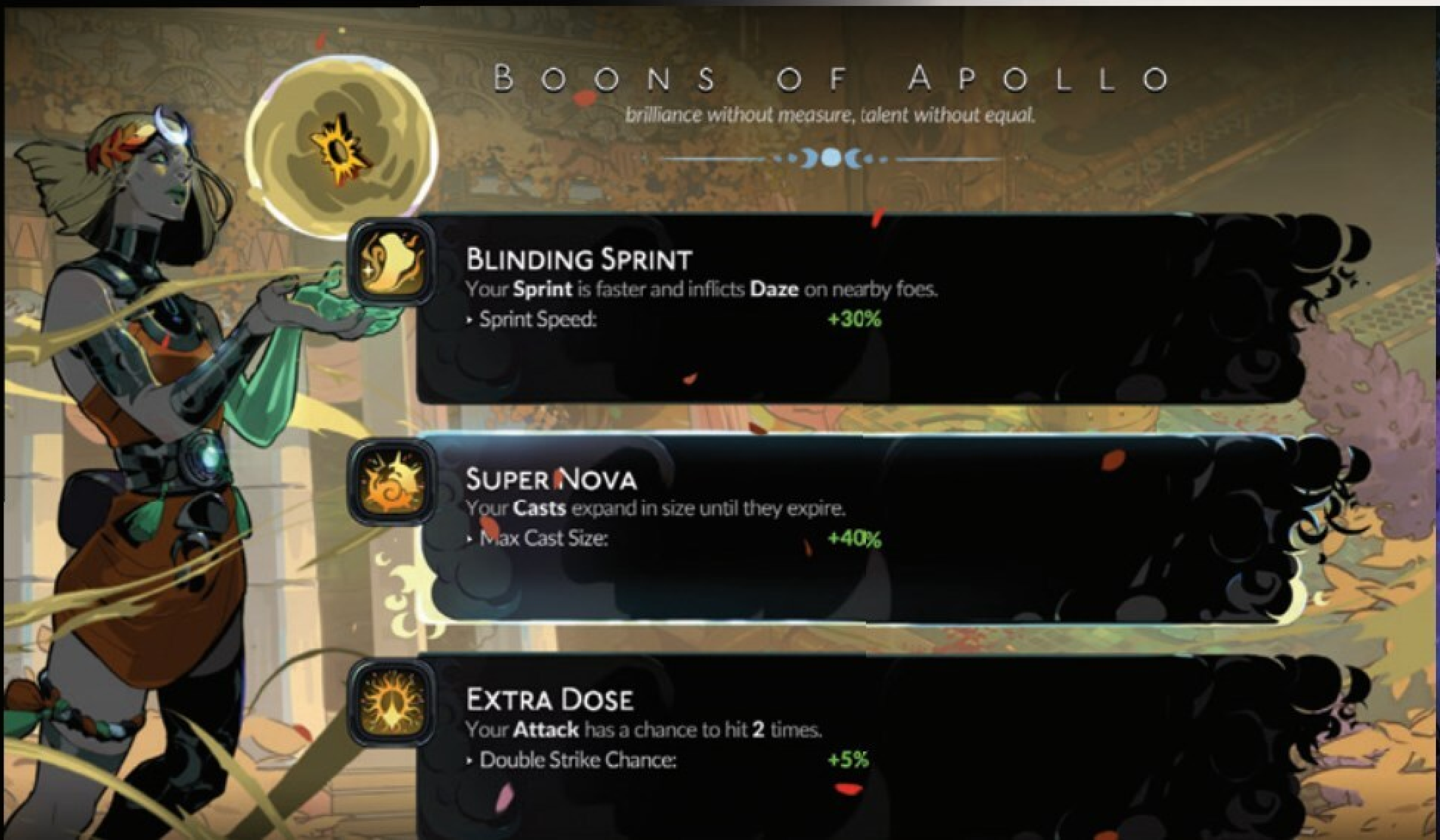
"I felt like there was more to say with the world of Hades and some interesting stuff to explore creatively still and I hadn't really felt that way after any one of our other games," he says.

Korb developed the soundtrack for Hades 1 using a three-pronged approach. At its heart was the palette of classic European instruments to provide the game's ancient Mediterranean vibe. These primarily include the bağlama, a Turkish three-stringed instrument, the bouzouki, a Greek-style mandolin, a traditional mandolin, and a lavta, a Turkish lute. Korb combined this with heavy metal/hard rock compositions and the secret sauce of the theremin, an electronic instrument that provided what Korb describes as the soundtrack's "Halloween music component."

For Hades II, the witchcraft and occult themes provided a pronounced element of spookiness the first game lacked. Looking at the trifecta that formed Hades 1's sound, he decided to more or less swap out the metal/rock pillar in place of a sound more befitting for Melinoë.

"Zagreus has kind of straightforward rock representing him. I thought Melinoë maybe [has] more of like an industrial kind of synthesizers and things like that. So, I tried to incorporate more of that type of stuff into the soundtrack... There's still hard rock and stuff, but I'm definitely leaning more towards synthesizers, electronic industrial kind of ingredients there, which was a lot of fun."

Korb tries to give each region a distinct, stylistic sound. He specifically teases that the music for the first biome of the second unlockable route sports a surprising jazz/pop influence. "I've got a rippin' sax solo on one of them, a flute solo; some crazy stuff happening in that first biome."



BOONS OF APOLLO

brilliance without measure, talent without equal.

BLINDING SPRINT

Your **Sprint** is faster and inflicts **Daze** on nearby foes.

- Sprint Speed: +30%

SUPER NOVA

Your **Casts** expand in size until they expire.

- Max Cast Size: +40%

EXTRA DOSE

Your **Attack** has a chance to hit **2** times.

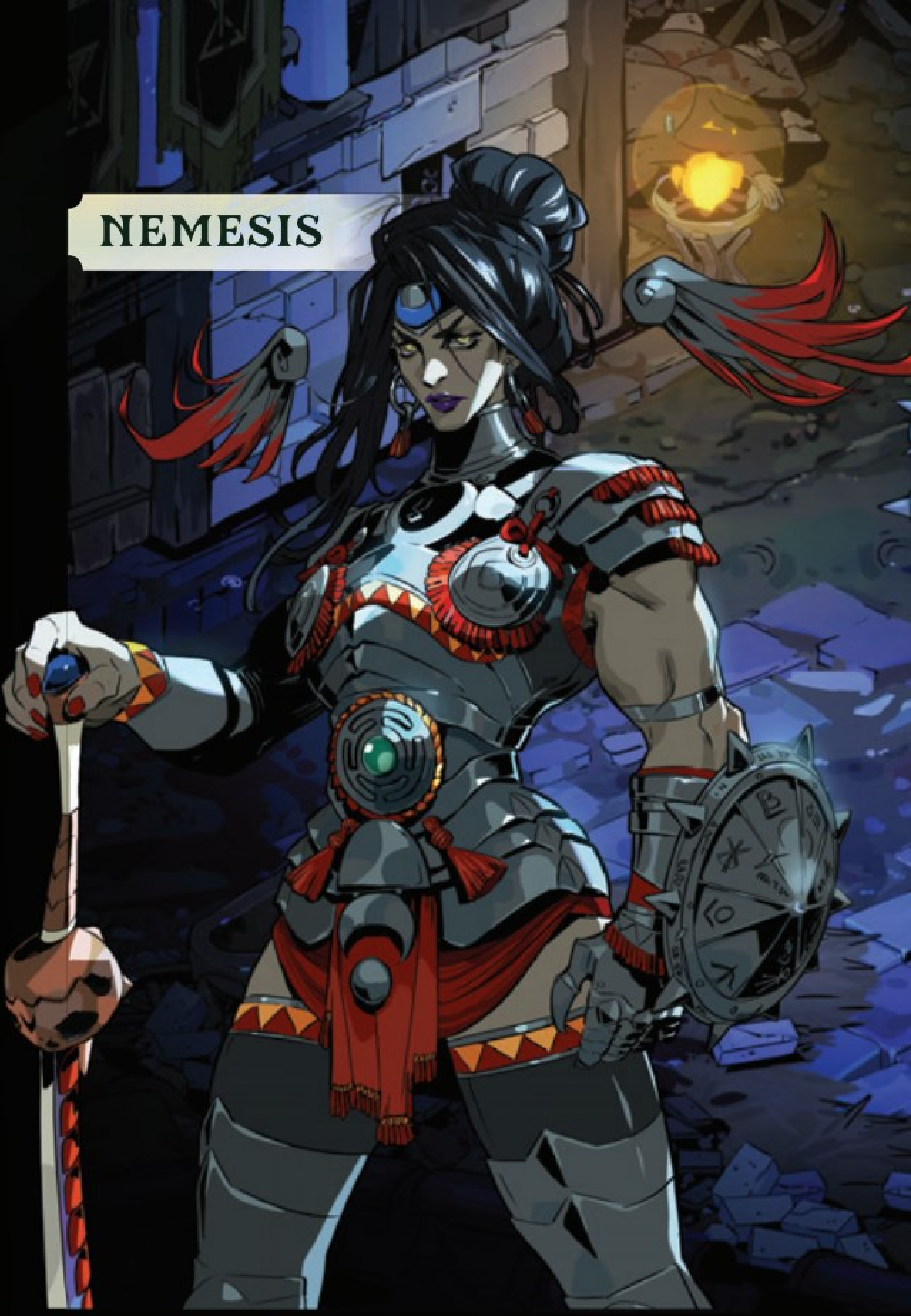
- Double Strike Chance: +5%

RETURNING TO EARLY ACCESS

The original Hades saw the team tackle its first Early Access project. If you've watched *NoClip*'s six-part documentary series *Hades: Developing Hell*, which captures the game's entire Early Access journey (I highly recommend so if not), you've witnessed the trials and tribulations that come with building a game in front of the scrutinizing eyes of players. Though it resulted in one of the most successful Early Access runs for a game, it was still surprising to see Supergiant immediately jump into that frying pan for the second time. But the studio didn't want it any other way.

"It's amazing what Early Access can do for your video game," says Amir Rao. "In our case, it helps us refine, it helps us make it better, it helps us figure out where to expand and where to kind of refine rough edges. It really helps us prioritize.

[So] I think for Hades 2, there was zero question that it would be an Early Access game. I think we knew it kind of had to be to basically be able to make the type of experience that would surprise and delight our players, that would be refined but expansive and move at your own pace and do all the things we need a Hades thing to do."



Hades II's Early Access launch offers far more content than the first game did. It includes the entirety of the Underworld route, bosses and all, and the first two areas of the second route. That already makes it bigger than the final version of Hades 1. That's because Supergiant decided to launch Hades II at a much later stage in its development cycle compared to the first game. Hades II has already been in development for about three years. This approach stemmed from having a successful blueprint to build elements less likely to need major adjustments; they already know the core elements that work. Supergiant says the limited-access technical test made available prior to the Early Access launch provided validating player feedback, allowing the team to identify and correct issues before Hades II became available to a wider audience.

Supergiant learned many lessons during Hades 1's Early Access period. Developing at a sustainable pace seems to be one of the biggest, with Rao saying the team will likely need more time to create Hades II updates compared to the first game's roadmap. However, the team is feeling more confident about the process now that it's starting from experience instead of from scratch. That's both an uplifting benefit and an intimidating thought.

"Working on Hades II, we are cursed with the knowledge of knowing the minimum that it will take to make this game," says Kasavin. "And that can be daunting because we know it took a lot. But we've done it before."

Rao describes Supergiant as a learning-oriented studio despite its small size, to the point that the team has even rehearsed the rhythm of developing regular updates (as it had for Hades 1), with Kasavin comparing it to training for a marathon. Rao was personally in charge of reading every piece of player feedback for the first Hades, and he's excited by the idea of figuring out the most effective strategies for implementing suggestions.

Hades II launched in Early Access on Steam on May 6 (including being playable on Steam Deck), as opposed to being an Epic Store exclusive. As for what's to come over the course of its development, Supergiant is primarily focused on crafting the final two biomes of the second route. It's also creating a sixth weapon to join the five already available. Several gods need their final art portraits (characters like Hestia and Charon still appear in their temporary robed forms as of publishing). Supergiant also wants to add more personalization features to The Crossroads. There's also that pesky ending to build.

Supergiant plans for the game to remain in Early Access for at least the remainder of 2024. The team doesn't have a window for when it will launch out of Early Access or if it will

take longer or shorter to do so than the first game. When asked about a 1.0 launch beyond PC Kasavin states, "We expect for Hades II to eventually be available for PC, Mac, and console platforms, though can't confirm which console platforms yet."

EMBARKING ON A NEW RUN

Supergiant still has a ways to go before Hades II is ready for 1.0, but it has earned the trust of its fans to take as long as it needs to deliver a successful product. It's a faith that it doesn't take for granted. "Our community is incredible," says Jen Zee. "They have the patience, they have the empathy and the understanding to wait for us to work at a sustainable pace."

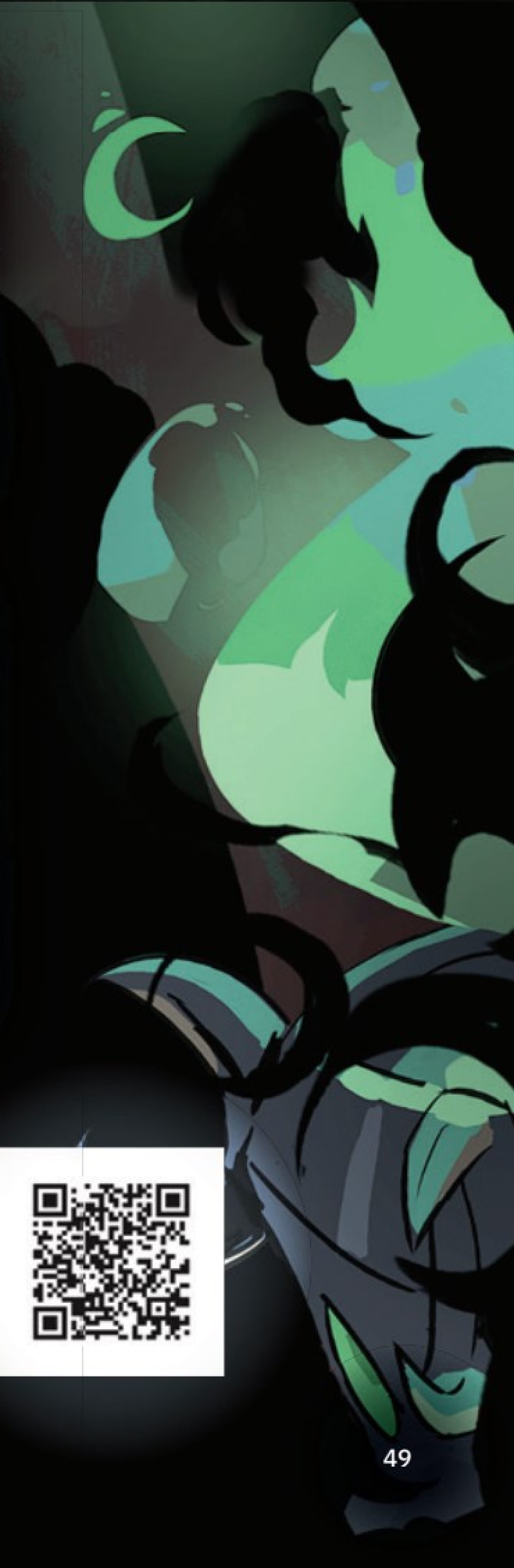
From what we've played thus far, Hades II is already living up to its predecessor. It's fun, it's beautiful, it's engaging, and it feels on track to surpass the first game in overall quality. That would be an impressive accomplishment and one that perhaps Supergiant is feeling more confident about achieving.

"One of the challenges going from a game, and being a studio that doesn't make sequels to suddenly making a sequel, is that you have all these internal and external pressures that are placed on you," says Zee. "And I remember early on in development, thinking, 'You know, the goal isn't to make something better.' It's not to make something better, it's to make something that stands up on its own legs, just like every other game we've ever made. It's the same approach. And yet, three years later, I can look at what we've made together, and I can say, 'Actually, that is better.'"

Besides making a good product, the most important goal for Hades II, as with all of Supergiant's games, is that it does well enough to ensure that they can continue sticking together to make the next game.

"We do this because we really like doing it," says Rao. "And we like doing it together. I don't think we could have imagined all the things that happened happening. And as we move forward together, we're not necessarily trying to make sure those things happen again. That was a special moment. I think for [Hades], it was amazing that so many people loved it so much, and that it achieved so much, and that was an honor in so many ways. And it took us a while to figure out what to take away from that and what to make of it. But we just want to keep making games together." ■

Want more Hades II exclusive content? Head to GameInformer.com/Hades2 for developer interviews, feature deep dives, and more



PUTT

ING THE SEOUL IN CONSOLE

Expanding globally, Nexon aims big with its first looter shooter,

THE FIRST DESCENDANT

BY WESLEY LeBLANC

With just four days in Seoul, South Korea, I filled my maps app with pins of restaurants, Buddhist temples, must-see attractions, scenic parks, market streets, and more to visit. I clocked around 10 miles of walking daily and think I saw as much of this massive city as possible with my allotted time. My journey from east to west, north to south of Seoul was only possible by the city's expansive public transportation network of buses and trains. And while I listened to "Magnetic" by K-Pop group ILLIT more times than I'll admit (when in Korea, right?) through headphones on these trains and buses, I spent much of my time observing how others spent time waiting for their stop.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, everyone is glued to their phones, myself included. But unlike me, doom scrolling on X (formerly Twitter) before switching to Instagram before switching back to X, a lot of people were playing games I recognized, like League of Legends' auto chess spin-off, Teamfight Tactics. But there we also plenty of other games I didn't know, like Light of the Stars, Soul Strike, and more. While touring one of Nexon's Seoul-based studios, Magnum Studio, I asked its head, Beomjun Lee, if mobile gaming is as popular as my public transportation travels had me believe. His answer was a quick yes. A study published by Statista Research Department in February concludes that, according to its 2022 survey, 63 percent of South Koreans play mobile games, with the market having an estimated worth of 14 trillion South Korean Won (or $10.2 billion) that year.

Nexon, the company that invited me to its studio, has plenty of mobile hits, like FIFA Mobile and MapleStory M, and a good amount on PC, too. Based on how many PC cafes I saw in Seoul, I'd guess PC is the biggest gaming market in South Korea or close behind mobile. But its staple of console releases features just two so far: KartRider: Drift and last year's The Finals. With its PC and mobile gaming on lock, Nexon is slowly aiming West, looking to break into global markets and focusing on console releases alongside its usual output to do so. And what better way to do that than with a free-to-play (easy entry), third-person (ripe for customization), looter-shooter (a genre popularized by the likes of Destiny and Warframe that continues to dominate a large mindshare of games)?

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Online Multiplayer Shooter
PUBLISHER Nexon **DEVELOPER** Nexon **RELEASE** 2024

AMBITIONS IN ALBION

The First Descendant is just that, and though I was weary of another free-to-play game, and another looter shooter at that, after an hour of hands-on time, I'm excited, antsy even, for its release this summer when I can play more.

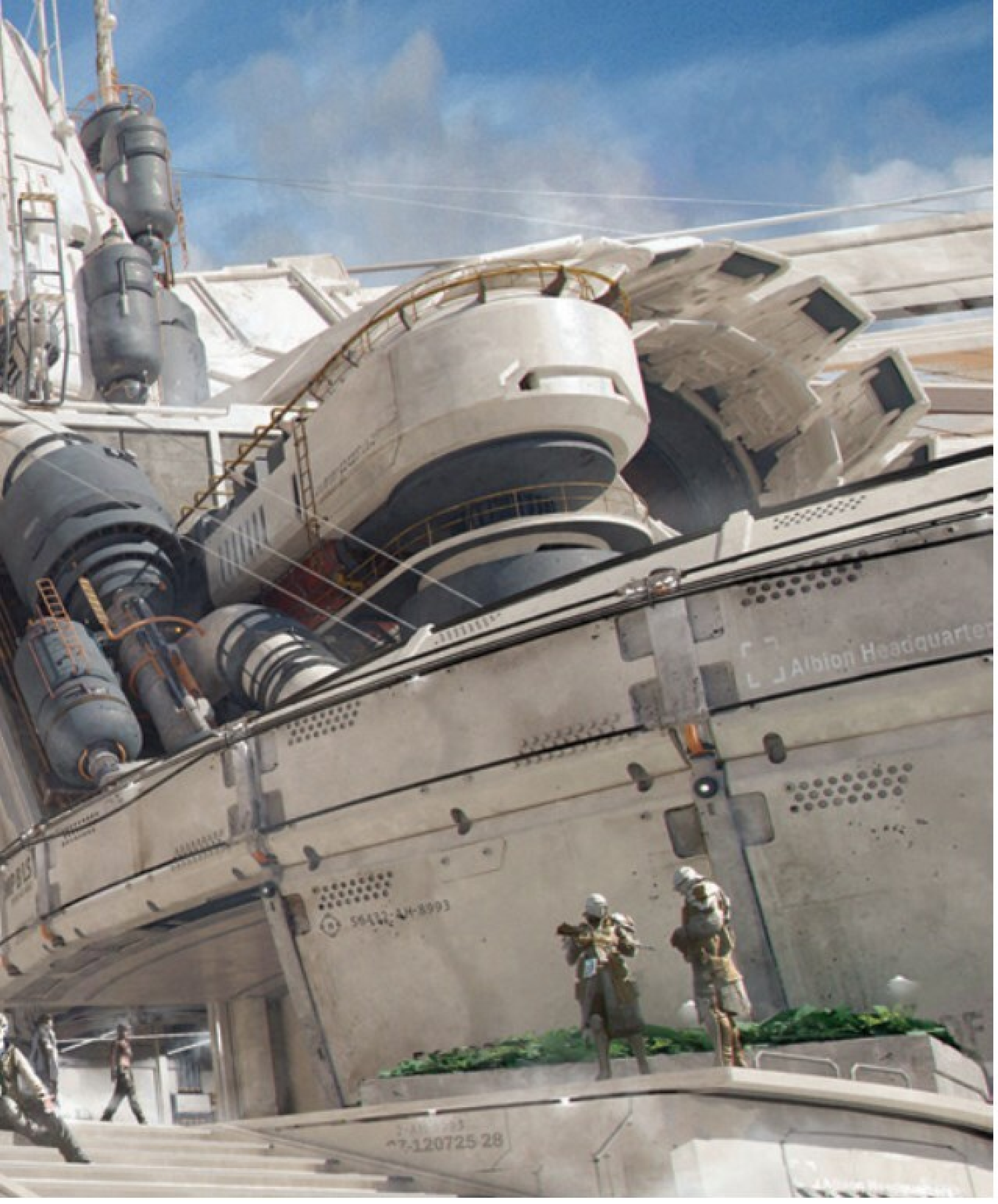
Revealed last August as part of Gamescom 2023, The First Descendant is in development at Nexon's Magnum Studio with its sights set on a Summer 2024 release. I pushed for a more exact release date, but the team wasn't ready to share; it's clear it's working hard to polish it up in these last few months, and for good reason, too – the team has lofty ambitions with The First Descendant.

"The main feature of The First Descendant is the PvE co-op element," Lee, who is also the lead producer of the game, tells me through a translator. "It's an online shooter RPG, and we consider it the next generation of looter shooters."

That term caught me by surprise. It's a bold statement, almost braggadocious, but after talking with Lee and creative director Minseok Joo and playing the game for an hour, I understand where the team is coming from. In my early hands-on impressions, the First Descendant feels like a mish-mash of other greats in the genre. Taken literally, it's also a looter shooter made exclusively for the "next generation" of consoles as it's coming to PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S alongside PC, with crossplay and cross-progression, too.

GOING HANDS-ON

Dropped to an Earth-like sci-fi world where humanity is on its last leg in a city called Albion, my chosen character, Viessa, is searching for something



called the Ironheart. She's joined by an ally named Bunny (yes, her suit's silhouette is that of a bunny). Immediately, weapons are crunchy and tactile. I sense every bullet in the controller and the on-screen recoil, and it feels great. It helps that the entire game, developed from the ground up in Unreal Engine 5, is gorgeous. I joke with Lee that I'm happy the team is making a console version of the game as The First Descendant will melt my PC, which is admittedly due for an upgrade. Seeing words like "frame generation," "ray reconstruction," and "ray tracing" in the options confirms my belief.

The weapons aren't anything special, though. In my play session, I encounter machine guns, sub-machine guns, shotguns, grenade launchers, and long-range snipers. They all feel great, but The First Descendant isn't doing anything new here. Each character's magical powers are what makes combat distinct. Viessa has access to ice, with a passive skill that creates spheres of ice around her body to damage and slow enemies that get too close, and four active skills that do area-of-effect damage, increase running speed and shield, and more. She can even place a snowstorm onto the playfield, damaging and immobilizing those caught within.

Her abilities are wildly different from Valby, the water-based character I'd play as later. Valby consumes less mana when standing in water and has moves to create puddles, making for a rewarding ability loop. She can even liquify the area around her, allowing her to move through enemies with increased defense and speed. Viessa's moves are more straightforward, but Valby's is more rewarding as part of a co-op experience, even if it takes longer to get my sea legs.

As I progress through the prologue, I encounter Karel, The First Descendant's big bad. He immediately, seemingly, kills Bunny, and it's clear he's not mincing words. He will do whatever he must to obtain the Ironheart.

Unfortunately for Viessa, at the ready to avenge Bunny, Karel dips, leaving a Gravewalker tank boss behind. This boss fight (and the Stunning Beauty boss I'll take on later while playing as Valby alongside a developer from Magnum Studio) is the highlight of my time with The First Descendant. Each boss has its own set of moves and mechanics to follow, including checks that require more strategic work, but how I, the player, fight them most intrigues me.

SETTING THE STAGE

One hundred years ago, the Vulgus crossed over the dimension, destroying life as humans knew it. The alien Colossi arrived, too, bringing even more destruction. The surviving humans gathered in Albion to restore humanity. Over time, they worked with Vulgus Magisters and evolved from swords and shields to guns and magic, thanks to special genes that house magical Arche unlocked within humans. Those humans whose Arche was awakened became the Descendants, Albion's chosen protectors. Things are on the up. That is, until Karel, the new Vulgus leader, invades in search of the Ironheart, which is also what the Descendants are after.

The Ironheart can close the dimension that Karel, his Vulgus army, and the Colossi used to reach Albion in the first place, and it's up to players to find it.

The First Descendant is fast. The characters move swiftly, and abilities, which fly loosely, allow them to zip around in combat. I can imagine the magical chaos that ensues with a full team of four. But the grapple hook excites me most about the possibilities of The First Descendant's combat.

While fighting enemies, I scan by clicking the right stick to find weak points highlighted in blue. After shooting them enough, they turn yellow, meaning it's time for my favorite part of the game: grappling up to the yellow part and ripping it off. It's an awesome mechanic and takes an experience I've played hundreds of times in looter shooters – shoot the boss a bunch – and makes it more dynamic. It's not just about shooting; it's about blasting a weak point long enough that I can grapple to it and then work to yank it right off, shedding the boss' layers as I do.

CRAFTING YOUR DESCENDANT

Outside of combat, the game offers plenty of customization that powers free-to-play experiences, though I don't know how microtransactions will play into the game. You can customize loadouts for every character, each with their own weapons and abilities. There are a ton of costumes, ranging from maid outfits to fire brigade uniforms and more, and you can customize various areas of your character with unique chest pieces, Fortnite-style back pieces, and more. You can test out all of this in Albion's Lab, a test field with customizable dummies to check your loadout's damage output, feel, and more. Speaking to the team's commitment to the game and its community, this Lab was recently added following feedback from a recent beta.

"This is my first time seeing it," Lee says while showing it to me, indicating just how recently it was added. He says players can expect the game to change and grow with the community in this way.

I'm always nervous about free-to-play games and the associated monetization, but if The First Descendant sticks to cosmetic-focused microtransactions, as opposed to letting players pay to perform better in combat, for example, Magnum Studio is on the right track with the wealth of options I see for character customization.

I like that each character so far feels quite different, and leveling each up individually, instead of focusing on a single character for months or years, seems like a smart call in contrast with the genre. Knowing that three friends playing will have various Descendants to choose from, allowing for multiple strategies in how we approach missions, is exciting.

As for keeping players engaged beyond the game's initial launch, Lee says the team is taking a seasonal approach, with new battle passes in each drop. As is now the standard in the live-service genre, each battle pass will contain season-specific cosmetics, and you'll need to play through the new content to obtain them.

With an hour of The First Descendant playtime behind me, including a studio tour and interview with the team's leads, I am (im)patiently waiting for its release this summer. Despite my initial love of Destiny and attempts in Warframe at one point in my gaming history, both (and many others in the genre) have passed me by. Jumping back into them is too daunting and too confusing today. But The First Descendant is giving me what I want from those games, with variations on the formula, too. I still have questions, but Nexon still has time to answer them. For now, I'm crossing my fingers I get into the next beta. ■

Our coverage of The First Descendant doesn't end here – keep an eye out for an exclusive behind-the-scenes video of our time at Nexon and more

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DESTINY 2: THE FINAL SHAPE

Changing the rules

A decade has passed since the original Destiny first rolled out to an eager playerbase, ushering in not just a new era for Bungie, but helping to establish a new bar for interconnected living games to share with one's friends. While there's every reason to believe that the Destiny franchise will continue, the main storytelling arc of these last 10 years is finally reaching its culmination with the release of The Final Shape, a vast new expansion for the game that appears to break many of the gameplay rules that have defined the franchise to this point.

After a convoluted but exciting sequence of story events that have played out over the last couple of years, players are set to breach into the interior of the Traveler, and explore a mysterious new destination called the Pale Heart, pursuing and confronting The Witness – as close to a central "big bad" as the franchise has yet had.

However, the changes to gameplay are likely to be the biggest draw; many of the new additions allow players to break the conventions that limited a Guardian in prior releases. A new prismatic subclass will enable players to wield both Light and Darkness abilities simultaneously, crafting creative new amalgams that wouldn't have been possible in the past. By filling a meter with both Light and Darkness abilities, players can eventually trigger a new transcendence state, providing even more power and skills, like new combo grenades that mix features of prior grenades.

New supers are also on offer for each of the main classes. Warlocks get the Song of Flame, which dramatically overcharges melee, creating sentient seeking grenades, and buffing allies' damage resistance and ability regeneration. Hunters fling out Storm's Edge, a dagger throw that transports the Guardian where it's thrown to create a devastating whirlwind, which can then be repeated three times. And Titans gain the Twilight Arsenal, a Void axe assault that pulls enemies in and explodes them, with axes left behind for the Titan and their fireteam to wield as melee weapons.

The Final Shape also introduces new exotic class items that further break the system. These new items feature two randomly rolled perks that often mix and match existing perks, but sometimes draw in abilities that might have previously only been offered for a different class. For instance, you might have a Warlock class item that provides one skill that comes from the Titan pool, and another from Hunters.

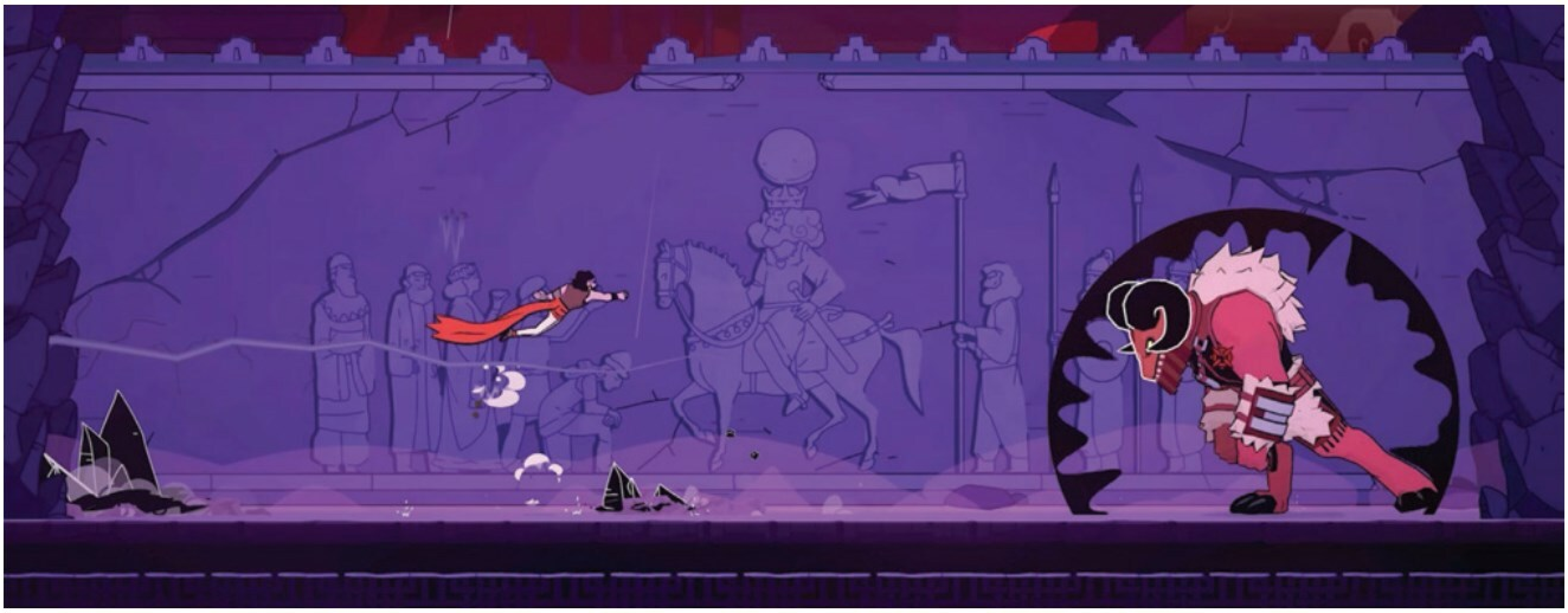
All this new power must get funneled somewhere; The Final Shape also introduces an entirely new faction of enemies. The Dread look incredibly challenging. The Tormentors faced in last year's Lightfall were just the tip of the iceberg, as other units join the party. Among a host of dangerous foes, I'm especially intrigued by the Grim, winged batlike creatures with guns that can suppress your Guardian's abilities. I'm also excited to face the Husk, an acrobatic melee attacker that, when killed, spawns a separate entity called a Geist that zeroes in and attacks. That's just a taste – we'll also be contending with other new units like the Subjugator, Attendant, and Weaver.

It's clear Bungie has not sat idle in the months since it delayed The Final Shape. A wealth of new content is on offer in this saga-concluding chapter of the story. It's a challenging moment for the game, as it faces increasing competition in the multiplayer living world shooter space. At the very least, the developer seems to have queued up an impressive mix of experiences for longtime players to experiment with – a firm statement that the game is up for some healthy rivalry. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** Online Multiplayer Shooter
PUBLISHER Bungie **DEVELOPER** Bungie **RELEASE** June 4

THE ROGUE PRINCE OF PERSIA

The Prince has finally returned again



The Rogue Prince of Persia is not a mode in Lost Crown or a spinoff. That was my initial assumption when Ubisoft reached out about the game. Rather, it is a whole new game from Evil Empire, the co-developer of Dead Cells. "It's actually a totally new story and new universe, so it's not connected to the previous games," Evil Empire art director Dylan Eurlings tells me when I ask about the game's canon and relationship to the Princes that came before it.

This version of the Prince has had time travel powers his whole life. He has a special item that returns him to the last place he was truly safe before he died, and it has filled him with hubris and a complete disregard for personal safety. Turns out when you can leap from any height and fight anyone without worrying about your mortality, it makes you a formidable acrobat and combatant. Unfortunately, his rash personality with little skill for strategic foresight has attracted an invading Hun army and its magic-wielding king Nogai, which is where the game begins.

I grasped The Rogue's basic controls quickly, thanks to my history with Dead Cells. In a complementary way, the games feel similar. Pouncing on enemies from above and swinging swords all feel familiar, but The Prince is more acrobatic than The Prisoner (a similarly unnamed protagonist that shares the first three letters of their name). Swinging on bars and clambering up platforms feels like Dead Cells, but it's running along the walls that feel new for the genre.

The Prince has been running along walls since 2003, but its different here. If there is a wall in the background, you can run up and across it to avoid obstacles and get to out-of-reach platforms. Functionally, it feels like a stand-in for a double jump, but it gives the Prince's movement an individual identity. It's the kind of mechanic I fear I will miss when playing follow-up 2D platformers in the future.

Combat overall is manageable. On an Xbox controller, I used the B button to dodge enemies, the Y button to kick them away, and the X button for a familiar standard attack. The Prince also has a ranged weapon with limited use. I didn't lean on that mechanic too much, but I did find a boomerang-like item that was more satisfying to use than the starter bow and arrow.

Alongside enemy combat, I also found a few rooms that were purely platforming challenges, and those are highlights. Narrowly dodging spinning blades and spiked pits using the Prince's wall-running ability felt great, and I am certain I will eagerly pursue these challenge rooms whenever they appear.

Perhaps expectedly, the final boss destroyed me. I only got a few hits in before it killed me and sent me back to what appeared to be the night before, where I was hanging out near a campfire with one of the villagers. I had been having a smooth time up until that point, but the boss was a stark reminder of the challenge I was familiar with from Dead Cells. Prince of Persia may be known and potentially appeal to a larger audience than Dead Cells, but Evil Empire is not pulling back on difficulty. "We don't try to make the game easier. We try to make it accessible," game director Lucie Dewagnier says.

I wasn't sure I would be ready to jump into another 2D Prince of Persia game after Lost Crown, but The Rogue has its own identity, genre, and style. I am usually happy to wait for 1.0 releases, but I enjoyed my time enough that I plan on participating in early access. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

Head to GameInformer.com for our full, unabridged hands-on preview and interview for The Rogue Prince of Persia

PLATFORM PC (Consoles TBD)
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft
DEVELOPER Evil Empire
RELEASE May 14 (Early Access)

SUPER MONKEY BALL BANANA RUMBLE

Getting things rolling again

After a long absence, the Super Monkey Ball series returned in 2019 and 2021 with remasters and remakes of previous games, but it's been over a decade since fans received an all-new Super Monkey Ball title. That changes in June, as Super Monkey Ball Banana Rumble is poised to deliver the continuation longtime players pine for. But with some recent mixed results, massive changes in game design best practices in the time since the series' heyday, and likely a whole lot of cobwebs to shake off for developer Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, I was skeptical about Super Monkey Ball's viability in 2024. Thankfully, after spending an hour playing Banana Rumble, those fears have subsided almost entirely.

Super Monkey Ball Banana Rumble brings a ton of content and changes to the series while still remaining definitively Monkey Ball. Banana Rumble apes its freshest new move from Sega's flagship franchise, Sonic the Hedgehog. In previous Super Monkey Ball games, you could jump, but that ability is replaced by a Spin Dash, a technique in Sonic's moveset since Sonic the Hedgehog 2 in 1992. At first, I was unsure of this change, but as soon as I got my hands on it through the tutorial, my concerns were dashed away.

The Spin Dash fits incredibly well into the Super Monkey Ball formula, giving you a better flow through the levels but also letting you peel out and blast off ramps and lips to find shortcuts. During my hands-on session, my most thrilling moments came when I lined up and blasted through a level using the Spin Dash. It's useful for cutting corners in the stages, but it's essential for hitting the missions each level gives you, particularly when combined with the refreshed physics that make the series feel better than ever.

The Adventure mode provides you with 200 all-new stages to play, each with optional objectives tied to collecting bananas and reaching the goal quickly. I loved my time in Adventure mode, where I was able to play through the first 20 levels, but my favorite moments playing came through Battle mode.

Here, I played through five games in lobbies full of bots; once the game is out, you can populate these games with up to 16 players. Race delivers an almost Mario Kart-style experience, complete with catch-up mechanics that extend beyond the power-ups on offer – the closer to first you are, the less complete the track is, making it easier to fall off. Banana Hunt tasks you with collecting as many bananas in an arena as possible, while Ba-Boom drops you in a map in a hot-potato-meets-tag hybrid where you need to avoid ending the round in possession of a bomb.

The last two Battle modes are team experiences. Goal Rush sends you hurtling down a hill, with the mission of passing through the highest-value goals possible. Robot Smash puts the Spin Dash to good use as you and your teammates must dole out as much punishment as possible to robots that spawn on the map. I can't wait to experience these modes with real-world players, as they feel like they hold a surprising amount of depth for side modes.

And that was my main takeaway from my time with Banana Rumble in general: I am impressed by how the game feels like far more than surface delights and lighthearted fun. The puzzle-solving fan inside of me can't wait to figure out the best paths through the various Adventure mode levels, while the party-game lover is itching to play more rounds of the Battle mode titles. I had an absolute blast during my time with Super Monkey Ball Banana Rumble, and what I played was just a sampling of the content that awaits players.

BY BRIAN SHEA

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Action/Platforming (16-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Sega **DEVELOPER** Ryu Ga Gotoku Studios **RELEASE** June 25

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V: VENGEANCE

Back with a vengeance

A long-established tradition in its spin-off series, Persona, the mainline Shin Megami Tensei franchise is giving fans a definitive version of the 2021 Switch-exclusive fifth numbered entry. Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance brings forward all the content of the original, but adds various quality-of-life improvements, demons, locations, and an entirely new storyline, setting it up to be the best way to experience the acclaimed role-playing game on whichever platform you'd like.

In Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance, you can take two completely separate paths, each lasting around 80 hours and containing different endings. The Canon of Creation is the storyline from the original game, while the Canon of Vengeance is a completely new path found exclusively in this new version of SMT V. In the Canon of Vengeance, you meet a new character named Yoko Hiromine, a mysterious girl with the power to fight demons. She can join your party, filling one of the slots typically reserved for demons.

My hands-on time with Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance takes place in two parts. The first hour is primarily set in the area around the school, giving me a sense of the dynamics at play with the various students. After meeting Yoko in Da'at and learning she works for Bethel's Japanese branch, she transfers to the protagonist's school since they will be working together. After class, I witness Sahori being bullied by two girls before Miyazu jumps in to help.

Later, Tao tells the protagonist she wants to help with Sahori's situation, but Yoko overhears the conversation. Yoko tells Tao that if she wants to truly help Sahori, she'll have to kill the bullies. The conversation is a stark reminder that Shin Megami Tensei doesn't shy away from dark turns in the story.

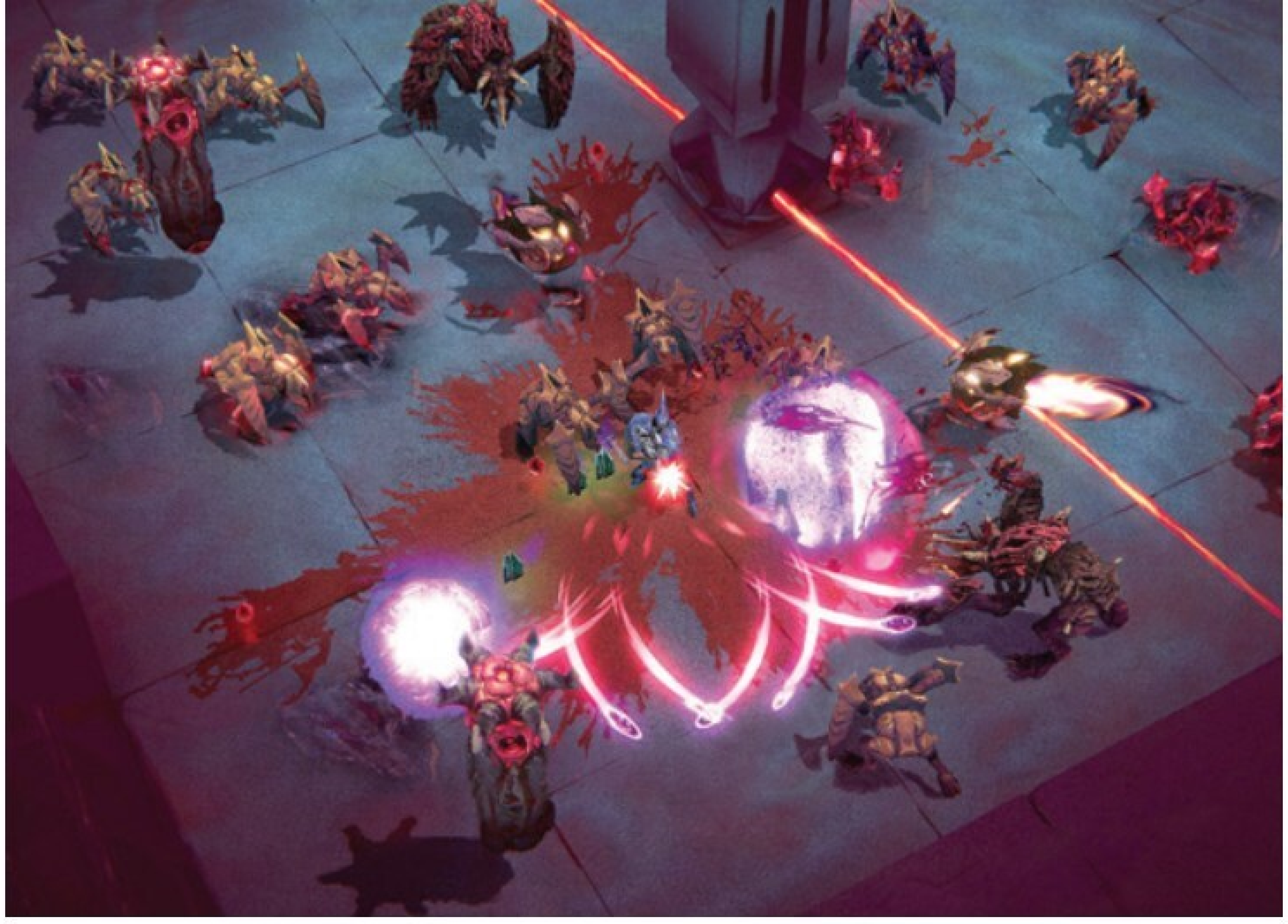
My first hour ends with Na'amah appearing in the train station and turning people to sand to collect Magatsuhi. This challenging battle requires you to overcome various status ailments, the least of which is not Charm, which debilitated my team on multiple occasions. Despite being available to a larger audience due to its increased number of platforms, Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance isn't pulling its punches when it comes to the difficulty the vanilla version delivered.

Following that battle, I move on to the second and final part of my demo. The protagonist meets up with Tao at a temple in Shinjuku, an entirely new location for Vengeance. After being transported to Da'at Shinjuku, Tao and Yoko join the party. Tao is best used as a healer, but she also brings light damage to the table. Meanwhile, Yoko is multifaceted in her offense, delivering fire, electric, and dark abilities. Because of that, Yoko very much comes in handy, as so much of the strategy of SMT's combat is built around exploiting weaknesses.

As I enter Da'at Shinjuku, an Angel greets the party, but rather than welcoming them with open arms, they're viewed as intruders. Much of the storyline of this area is figuring out why the party is being treated as a group of hostiles, but also working to figure out how to get past the alerted Cherubim and Angels so you can reach your goals. I won't spoil much here, but two characters from the vanilla version of SMT V appear with a plan, but it also seems extremely likely that the two have ulterior motives. The fights are extremely engaging, but even with all the information handy (and a save file that seems loaded with recovery items), it's still a challenging experience.

I started playing the original Shin Megami Tensei V when it arrived on Switch in 2021, but I didn't have a chance to push past the first several hours. With Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance promising new platforms, improved performance on all platforms (aside from Switch), and a ton of new content, it feels like the perfect time for me to jump back into the world of SMT V with this new version. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Sega **DEVELOPER** Atlus **RELEASE** June 14



KILL KNIGHT

Fight like hell to hell

Here are some phrases I think would be dope to see in a video game trailer: “A place below hell itself,” “Revel in the carnage,” and “Master the demon within.” These are all phrases from the first trailer of Kill Knight, an upcoming isometric arcade shooter inspired by Hades set in an eldritch abyss of horror.

Now that you’ve read two sentences with possibly some of the coolest phrases and words strung together, I’m happy to say the game looks as good as it sounds. Revealed last month during the Triple-i Initiative Showcase, PlaySide Studios is bringing Kill Knight to PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, Switch, and PC sometime this year. The titular hero’s one goal is simple – kill the last angel – but if the gameplay we’ve seen is any indication, the fight won’t be easy, thanks to a seemingly endless onslaught of enemies to mow down with guns, melee weapons, and more.

Once a loyal knight, someone killed the now-Kill Knight and banished them to the abyss, home to eldritch horrors under Hell itself. You are but a desecrated corpse reanimated to fight inside special armor. Rising to eternal death, you must “exploit enemy weaknesses, enact brutal executions, and weave through the Knight’s arsenal to tactically manage resources as they dance with death in the Abyss and take the fight to global leaderboards against friends and foes alike.”

Players will attempt to transcend five fatal layers, each deadlier than the last, to defeat swarms of enemies in eldritch arenas. They’ll do so with top-down, arcade-action combat similar to that of Supergiant Games’ Hades, but there’s no indication that Kill Knight is a roguelike. As you survive, your Kill Power rises, increasing your speed and damage. Plus, there are plenty of challenges to unlock more of Kill Knight’s arsenal. And when you think you’ve mastered the realms of this void, Master Mode, which turns all five layers into one extended arena, awaits.

With a disgustingly gory visual style, lightning-fast action, and an extensive catalog of eldritch horrors to kill with various weapons, Kill Knight looks like the next indie game I’ll struggle to put down this year. And I can’t wait. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** PlaySide Studios **DEVELOPER** PlaySide Studios **RELEASE** 2024

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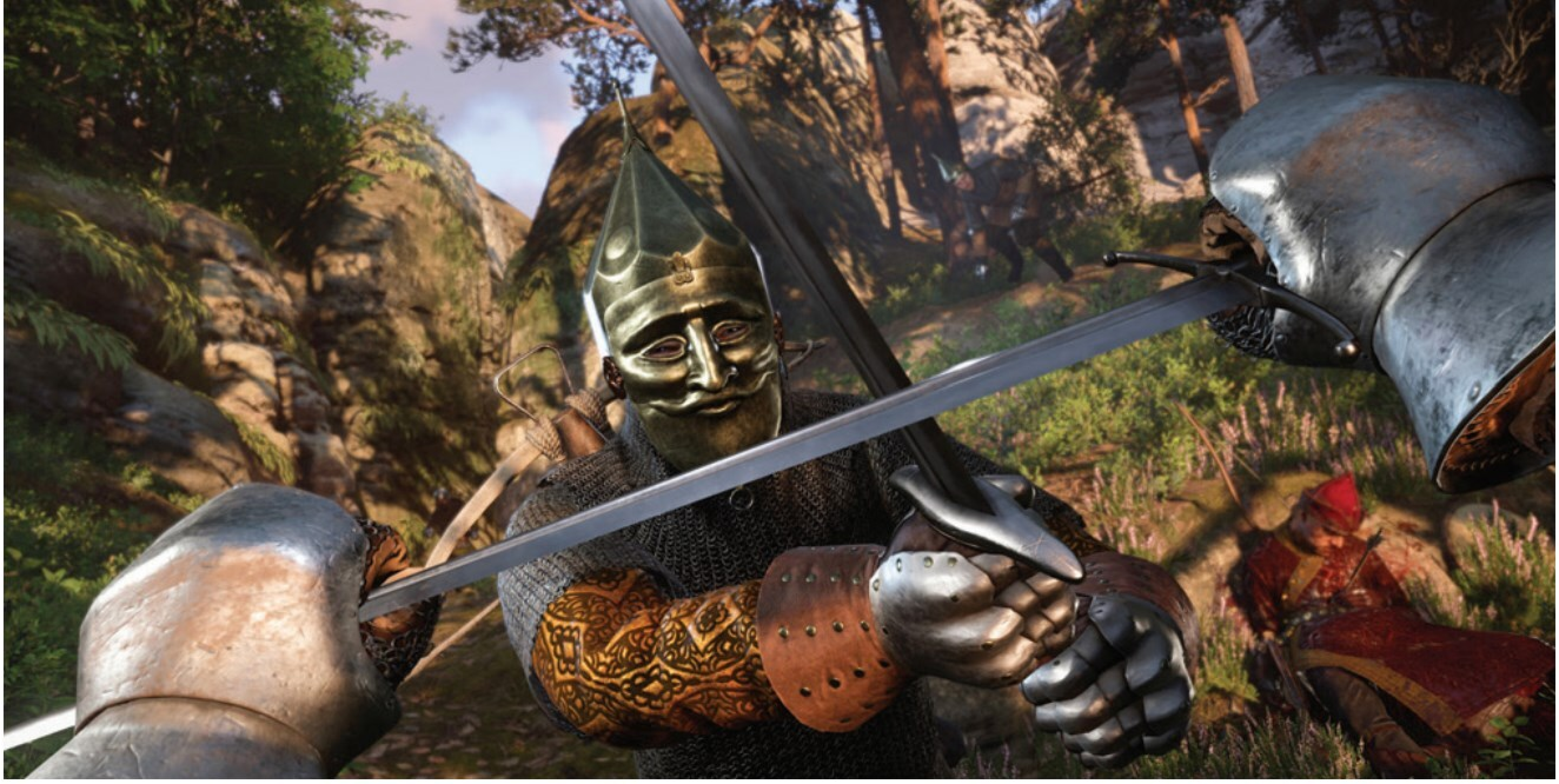


KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE II

Here comes the kingdom

Kingdom Come: Deliverance faced a rocky launch in 2018, with outlets (including *Game Informer*) criticizing its widespread bugs and general lack of polish, but it found success regardless, going on to sell two million copies and release a slate of DLC and updates. Six years later, Warhorse Studios is getting ready to launch a sequel and invited Game Informer to look at some early footage and trailers. While it's too early to speak to any performance issues, it's clear Warhorse has greatly expanded its work on the first game, and fans of the medieval ages may be in for a treat.

The Kingdom Come series is an action RPG set in the early fifteenth century, and while its plot is fictional, the games strive for historical accuracy wherever possible. The sequel follows the continued journey of Henry of Skalitz, a man who set out on a quest for revenge after his village was raided and destroyed. Squire to the carefree Sir Hans, he aims to take down Sigismund the Red Fox, the king of Hungary. With five hours of cutscenes (compared to the prior title's three), this story is a big focus for the game. While the narrative is a direct continuation of the first game, Warhorse Studios says newcomers should feel free to hop in at the newest entry.

The series plans to expand on more than just its story. For one, the world map is double the size of its predecessor. This includes the massive medieval city of Kuttenberg ("Too big," says creative director Daniel Vávra), which Warhorse claims to be its greatest challenge during the game's development. The urban area is contrasted by the natural wilderness of an area called Bohemian Paradise, a lush green space full of unique rock formations. This diversity of environment and color was particularly important for the game's visuals, according to art director Viktor Höschl, who wants to express that the era wasn't all mud and famine. Lead character artist Anna Pačesová adds to this sentiment, saying, "It was really colorful. It wasn't dark at all."

In addition to the world, gameplay has been expanded in several ways. The series offers first-person swordplay, but the sequel adds new ranged options as well. In addition to the inclusion of crossbows, Kingdom Come: Deliverance II features early firearms, which look like short-range handheld fireworks. The developers also emphasize the series' focus on player freedom and choice, adding new ways for the player to interact with the world's many characters and new ways for those NPCs to respond. If the player wanders around drunk and naked, for example, townsfolk will verbalize their discomfort, and the player is free to apologize or taunt right back at them.

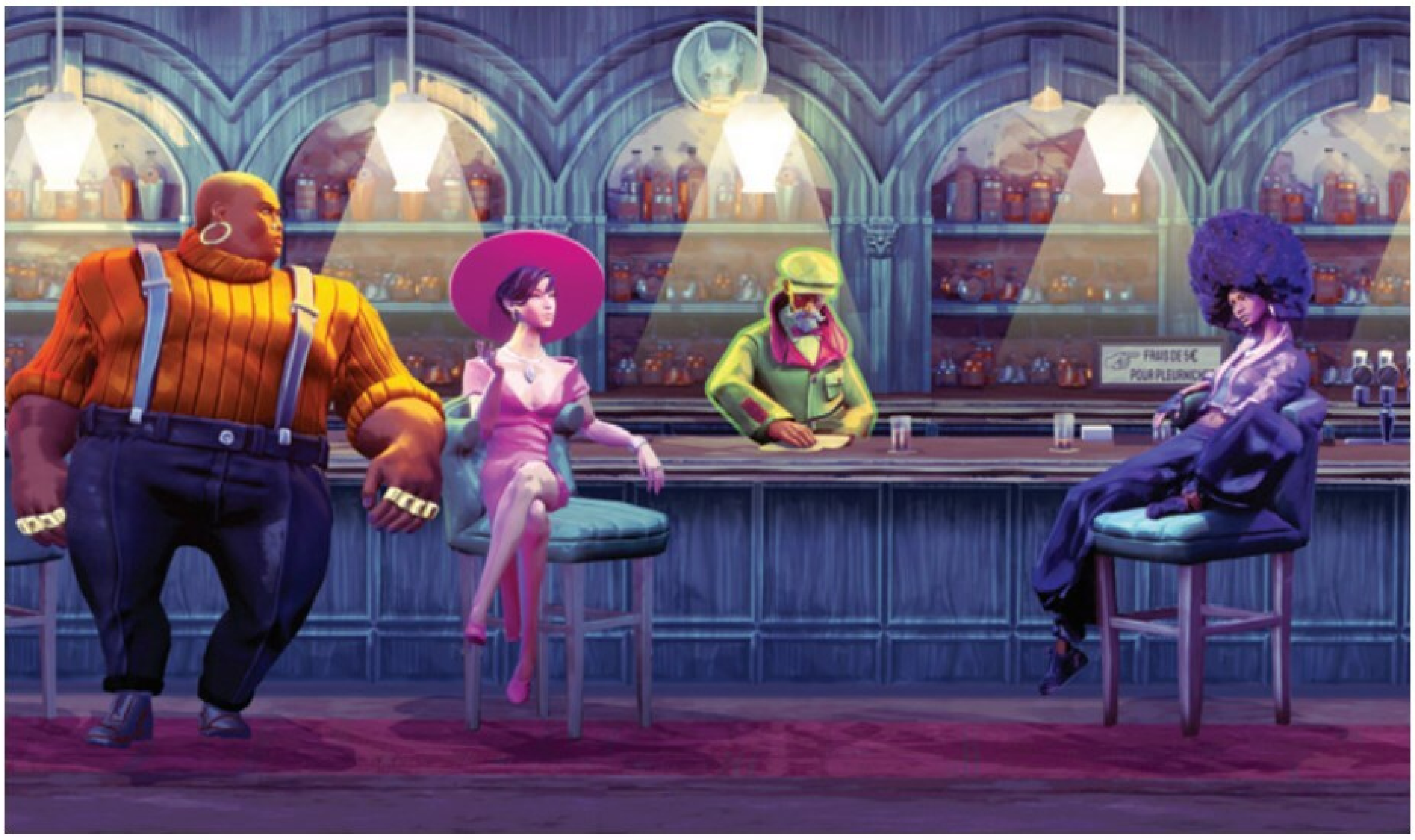
Our preview ends with a performance of a song from the game's soundtrack. Composer Jan Valta returns with a period-appropriate score, conducting an ensemble of instruments and a choir performing a piece that harkens back to the religious compositions of the 1400s.

Kingdom Come: Deliverance II will be released sometime later this year, and it simply looks better than its predecessor in every significant way. When Warhorse was founded 10 years ago, it was only 11 members strong; now, it's up to 250. It's no surprise, then, when creative director Daniel Vávra, seated in a dramatically lit Kuttenberg cathedral for the video presentation, says, "What we are making now is what it was supposed to be in the beginning, but we were not able to do it because we didn't have enough resources and experience and all that stuff. We've proven that the concept works, and now we can take it to another level." **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Deep Silver **DEVELOPER** Warhorse Studios **RELEASE** 2024

MONACO 2

Sneaking in a new dimension



The first Monaco released in 2013 at a point when Xbox Live Arcade had hit its stride, and there was a new appetite for the type of creative and unique game that existed below the huge budget triple-A, high-fidelity experience. Those kinds of games vastly outnumber the big-budget experiences we are familiar with today, but in 2013 we were discovering such experiences and marveling at their ingenuity. The competition is stiffer for Monaco 2 as it nears release, but creator Andy Schatz is clearly excited to revisit the criminal gameplay saying, "If Monaco 1 is about cat and mouse, Monaco 2 is about complexity and creativity."

Like the original, Monaco 2 is a game about pulling off heists. You and a team with disparate abilities work together to enter a facility of some kind, get what you need without raising an alarm, and get it out. And if you do raise an alarm – which you will, Schatz assures – then you will still have a good time. Maybe even a better time.

The biggest surprise about Monaco 2 is immediately apparent the moment the game starts. The game is now a full 3D experience. The original game was effectively a 2D pixelated game with players controlling nondescript blocks from an overhead perspective. The game favored information over style and was difficult to read for many. Shifting to 3D leads to dozens of improvements. The different characters look very different from one another, and the sequel can now lean into an art style inspired by Saul Boss, an artist primarily known for his work on Alfred Hitchcock's movie posters.

The switch to 3D overall improves readability for everything, and also opens up the game to more vertical options. Schatz cites big, memorable heist movies and sequences like the one from *Mission: Impossible* where Tom Cruise's character hangs from the ceiling to steal data from a computer. While you may not be literally dangling from a vent and catching sweat as it rolls down your face in the game, the hope is that you will have the same fun and intense emotions.

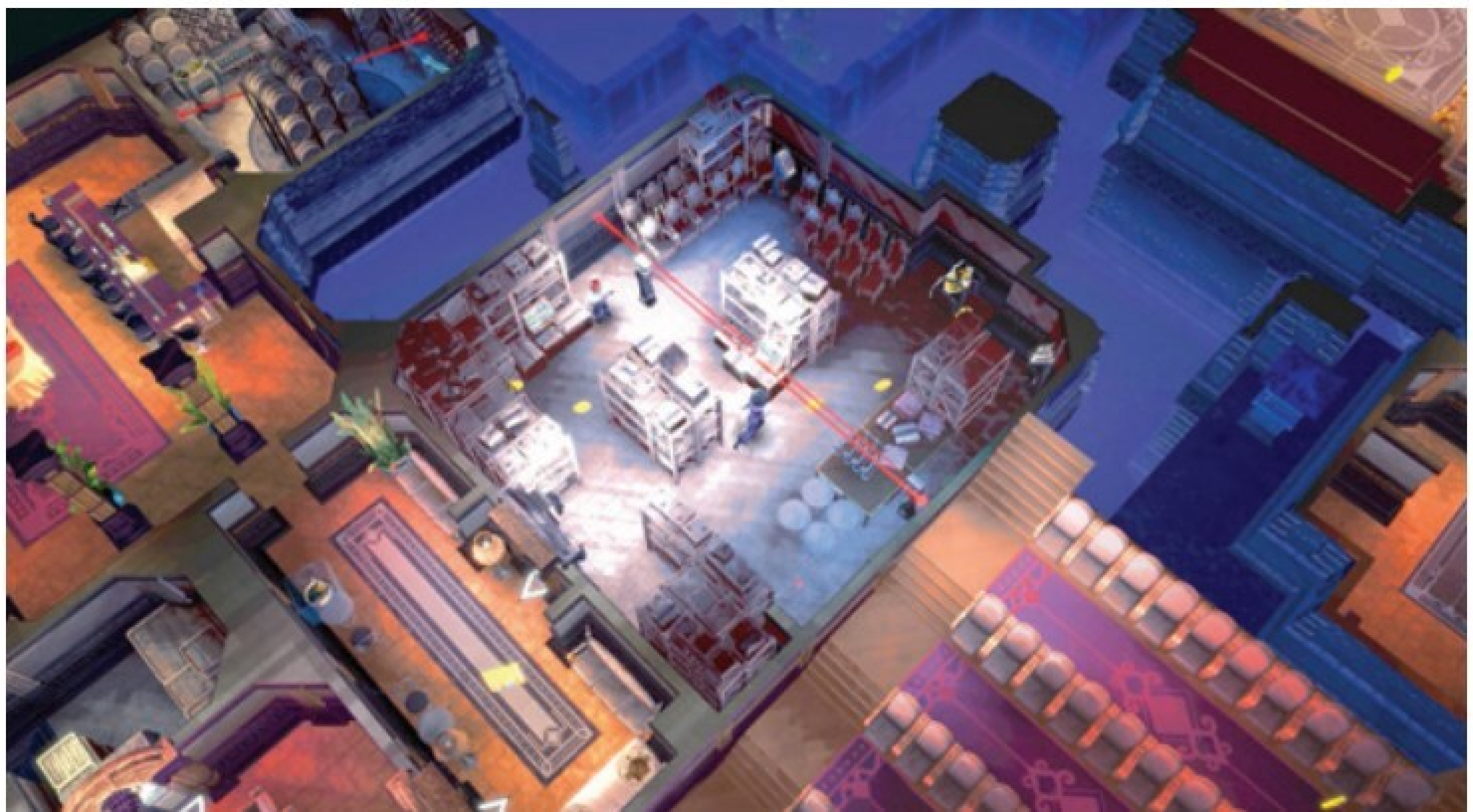
Schatz showed off a single-player gameplay session (though not yet fully detailed, local splitscreen and online co-op will be available) where he studied the score beforehand by looking at a blueprint of the building he intended to invade. The job is to enter a guarded opera house to plant false rumors at a specific location and steal money while there.

Schatz kicks off the heist with Cosmo and Panzer, a woman in a pink dress and a cute little Pomeranian dog that she can use to distract guards. Once inside, however, he swaps to different characters to take advantage of their abilities by jumping into a house plant where, in theory, your team is hiding. It doesn't really make sense, but that's okay because Monaco 2 is all about using different abilities to complete different tasks.

Much of the gameplay from that point forward is about staying out of guard sight lines and tracking their movement, procuring on-site items to help you succeed, and completing objectives however possible. The level is dense and intentionally designed with a complicated layout and hidden secrets. The idea is the more you replay a level, the better you will know it, and the more prepared you will be when you return to pull another heist.

Monaco 2 does not yet have a solid release date, nor is developer Pocketwatch Games ready to share platform details beyond PC. We are overdue, however, for a good cooperative crime game that isn't a shooter. Schatz's presentation is promising a concentrated and deep take on the heist fantasy with Monaco's overdue sequel. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (Online Multiplayer TBA) **PUBLISHER** Humble Games **DEVELOPER** Pocketwatch Games **RELEASE** TBA



STILL WAKES THE DEEP

Deep sea horror

The violent waves of a vicious storm batter the dreary Beira D oil rig off the coast of Scotland. As a worker in this massive complex, completing your routine tasks in this harsh environment presents enough of a challenge. It doesn't help that you and your crewmates are far from alone, as something decidedly sinister and inhuman has found its way aboard.

Still Wakes the Deep sees developer The Chinese Room (Everybody's Gone to the Rapture, Amnesia: A Machine for Pigs) return to the horror genre. The shorthand premise of this first-person adventure is John Carpenter's *The Thing* on an oil rig. Tonally speaking, associate art director Laura Dodds describes it in a developer diary as, "If Stanley Kubrick lost his mind shooting a documentary aboard an oil rig."

Set in 1975, players control a working-class ex-boxer from Glasgow, Scotland, who takes a job on the Beira D as an excuse to escape his problems back home. This has separated him from his family, and, despite the distance, seeing how his issues have followed him here helps flesh out his backstory and personality.

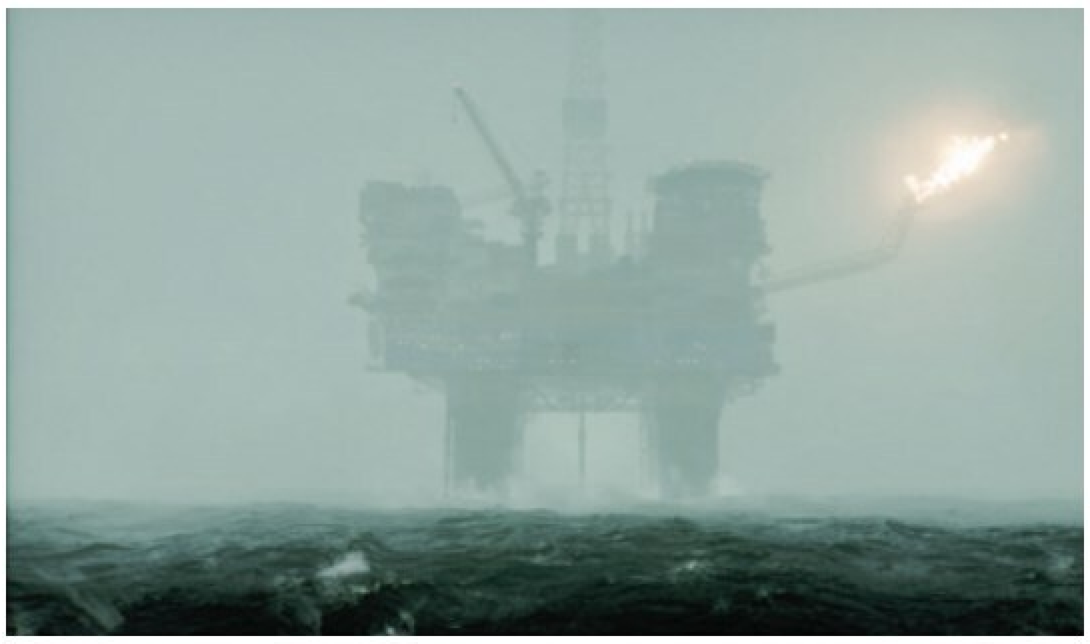
One night, a mysterious horror creeps onto the ship, communications with the mainland are cut, and your crew members go missing. There's no way out – even if there were, the rig is swept up in a storm. Whatever is lurking in the halls, you're completely defenseless against it. You have no weapons, so your only option is to run, hide, and search for any survivors who can help you. Some crew members have managed to cling to life in their own ways, and interacting with these poor souls adds a powerful human element; everyone is terrified about what's out there, and no one is equipped to deal with it.

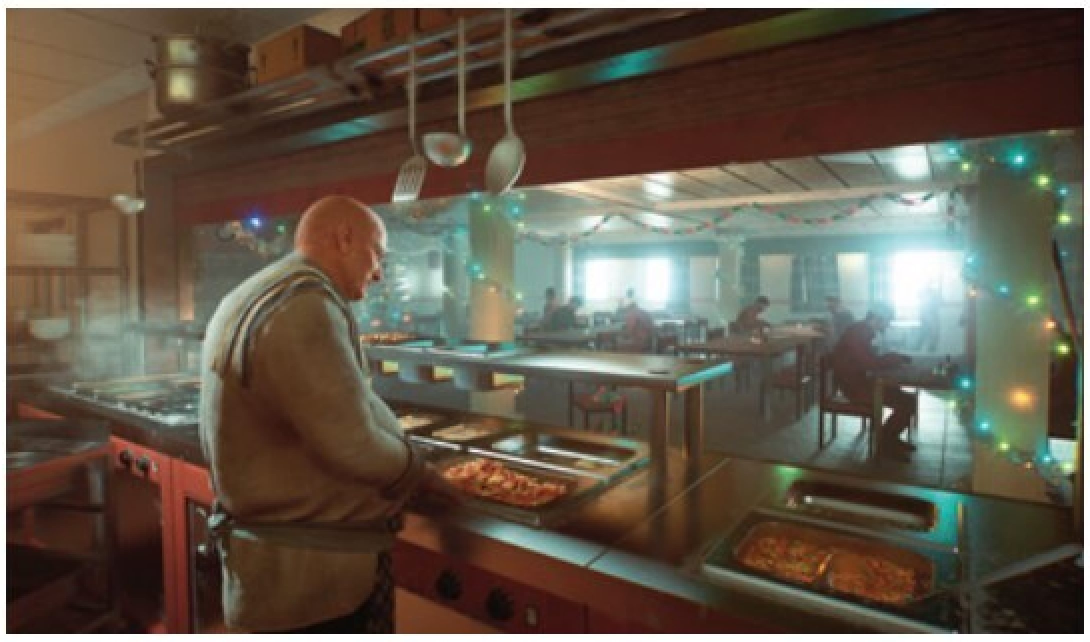
The Chinese Room describes the rig as "one big game level." Navigating the labyrinthine structure becomes a claustrophobic proposition when sneaking or sprinting within its narrow corridors. Exploration becomes perilous while scaling the exterior staircases and platforms as powerful winds and rain threaten to sweep you into the sea below. Hearing the blood-curdling howls of your pursuer echo through the walls keeps the tension of exploration high.

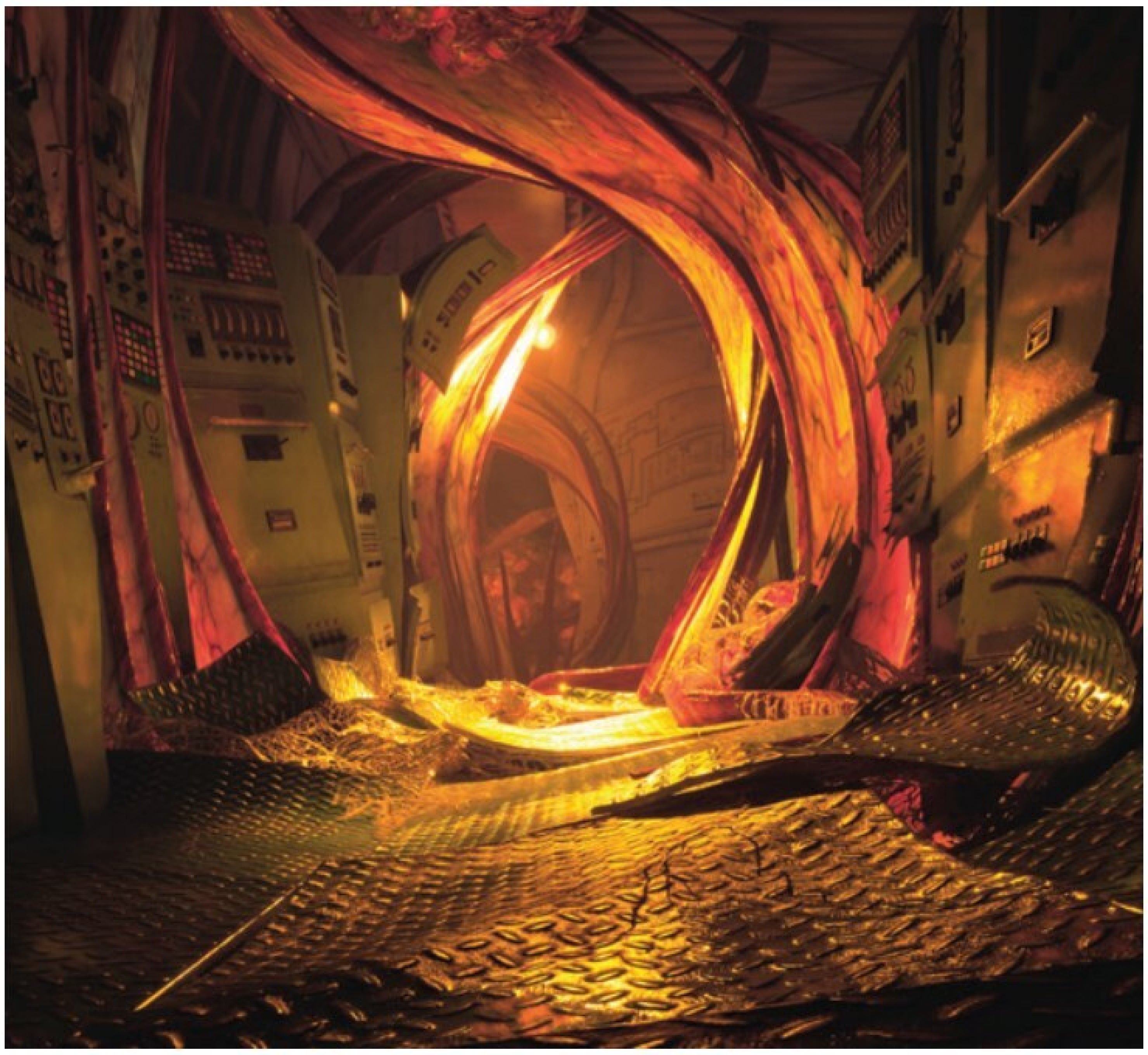
The Chinese Room has spent considerable time researching oil rigs in the North Sea to ensure Beira D feels authentic to the decade and distinctly Scottish. As the storm rages throughout the journey, the rig becomes more unstable. You'll feel it sway, buckle, and gradually sink with the ocean as it suffers damage, and you'll need to wade through the deathly cold waters of flooded corridors.

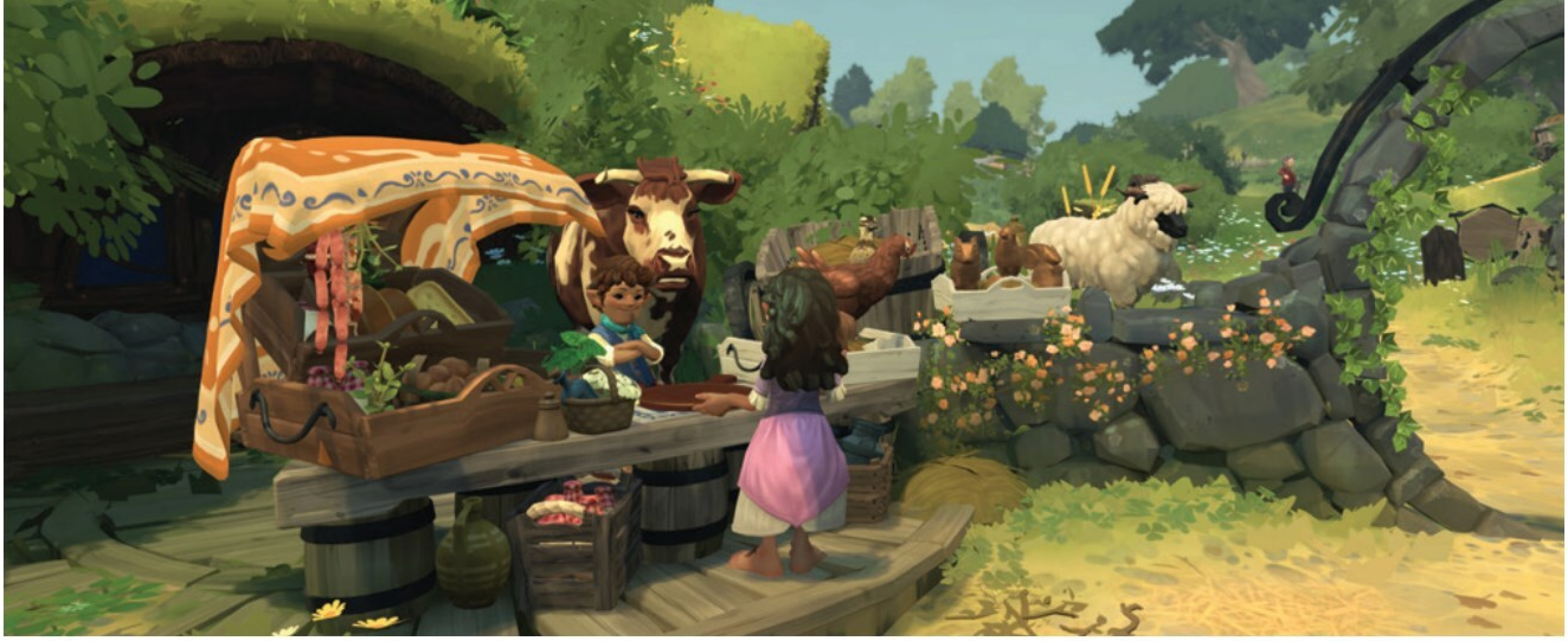
The Chinese Room is primarily known for creating "walking simulators" like Dear Esther because storytelling has always been its strongest suit. Seeing that talent applied to a gripping supernatural horror thriller in a unique setting, combined with more engaging gameplay, has me excited for Still Wakes the Deep when it launches on June 18. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Secret Mode **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room **RELEASE** June 18









TALES OF THE SHIRE

An unexpected journey into Hobbiton

Developer Wētā Workshop and publisher Private Division revealed Tales of the Shire last year with a short teaser that pointed toward a cozy adventure inspired by “The Lord of the Rings” on the horizon. It was one of *Game Informer*’s highest-performing stories that month, and for good reason: the people want to be Hobbits, they want to design and live in the Shire, and they want their second breakfast. Now, following the first official trailer for the game, we know players are getting all that and more.

While its visual style leaves me wanting – it’s mushy and looks undercooked – everything else going on in this trailer points to the Middle-earth Animal Crossing game people have imagined for years with Tolkien’s lovable Hobbits. Players are beckoned to create their own Hobbits, hairy feet and all, before beginning life in Bywater, a quaint town that’s not quite an official village of Hobbiton (though its residents hope it will be one day).

“Greet comfort at the door as you decorate your own Hobbit hole, tend to your garden, fish at the clear ponds, forage wild fruits and herbs, or trade with townsfolk,” a press release from Private Division that arrived alongside the game’s first trailer reads. “Prepare homemade meals to share with fellow Hobbits and foster relationships. With much to see and lots more to eat, enjoy days of splendor in the picturesque forests, lakes, and pastures.”

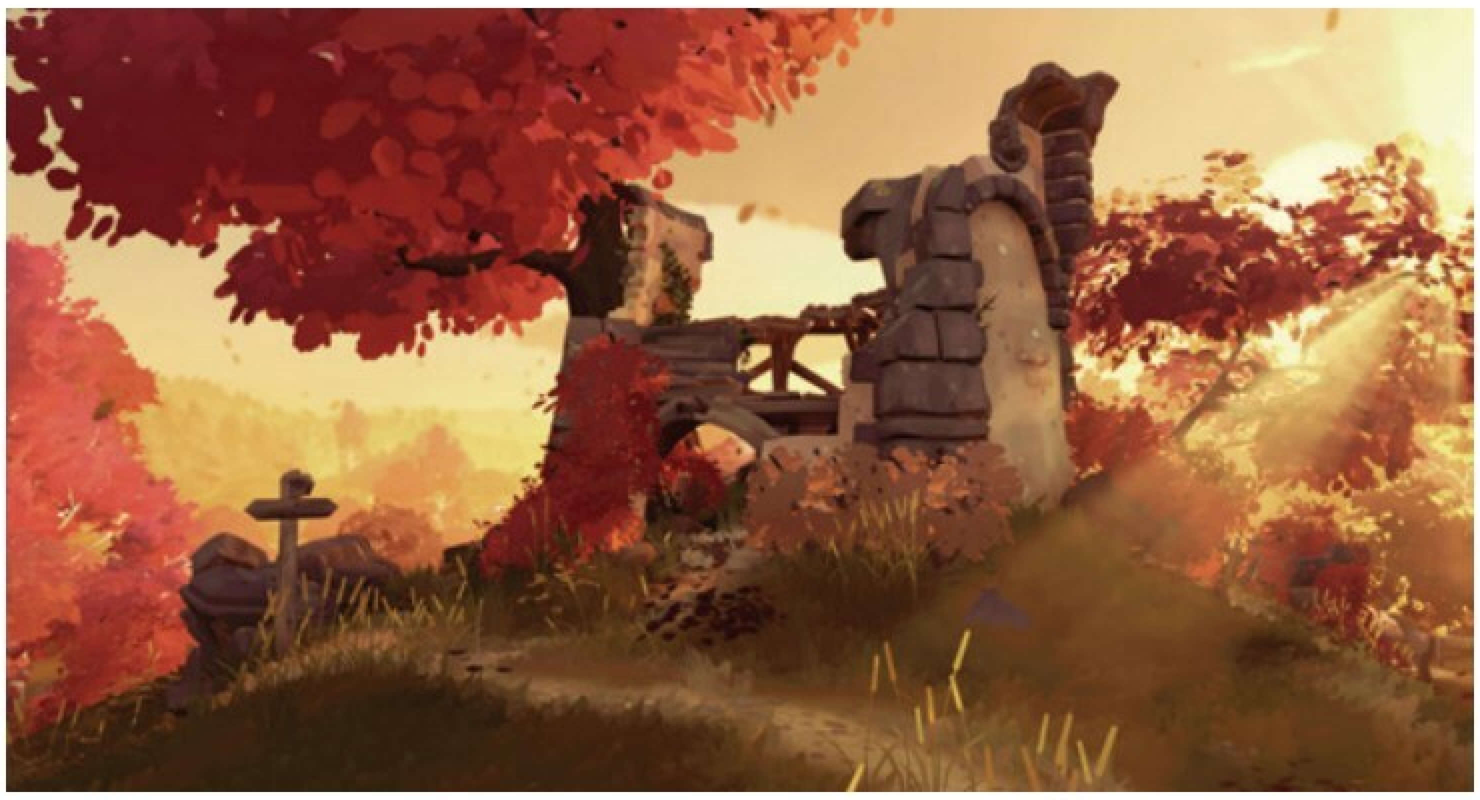
Tales of the Shire’s Hobbit hole customization features grid-free placement, making it easy to decorate your Shire and home however you want, seemingly in any way you wish. Although, without having gone hands-on yet, it remains to be seen how deep this customization goes. Thanks to the game’s use of seasons, you can harvest seasonal crops and flowers as time passes in the homestead for different bounties to stock your pantry. You can then use your harvest to cook new recipes and favorite classics for second breakfast, dinner parties with other Hobbits in Bywater, and more. Wētā Workshop says sharing meals with guests will create new relationships to cultivate as the seasons pass by.

Like these seasons, your daily activities change with time, and you can obtain rewards through story progression while encountering “familiar” and “iconic” characters. Here’s hoping we run into a Baggins or two during the adventure. You can trade with other townsfolk to get upgrades to skills, clothes, your home, and more, and special clubs will grant you even more rewards for daily activities.

For my money, issues with the game’s art aside, Tales of the Shire is the most exciting non-Animal Crossing simulation game revealed in quite some time. Its premise is excellent, playing on the imagination everyone who reads *The Lord of the Rings* or watches the movies has when it comes to Shire. We’ve had our fair share of games adventuring outside of the Shire, with orcs to kill, elves to befriend, and axes to grind; it’s about time we get to experience the more scenic aspect of *The Lord of the Rings* and live out some Hobbit fantasies.

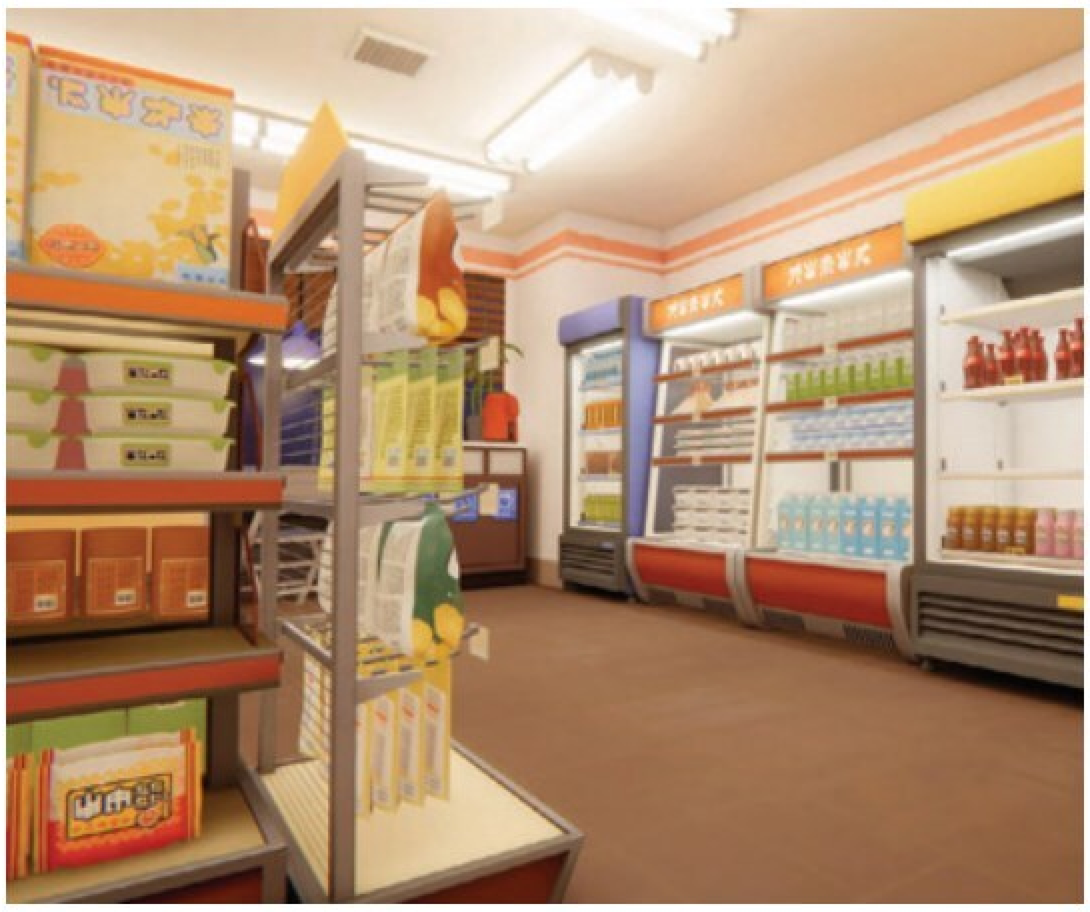
BY WESLEY LEBLANC

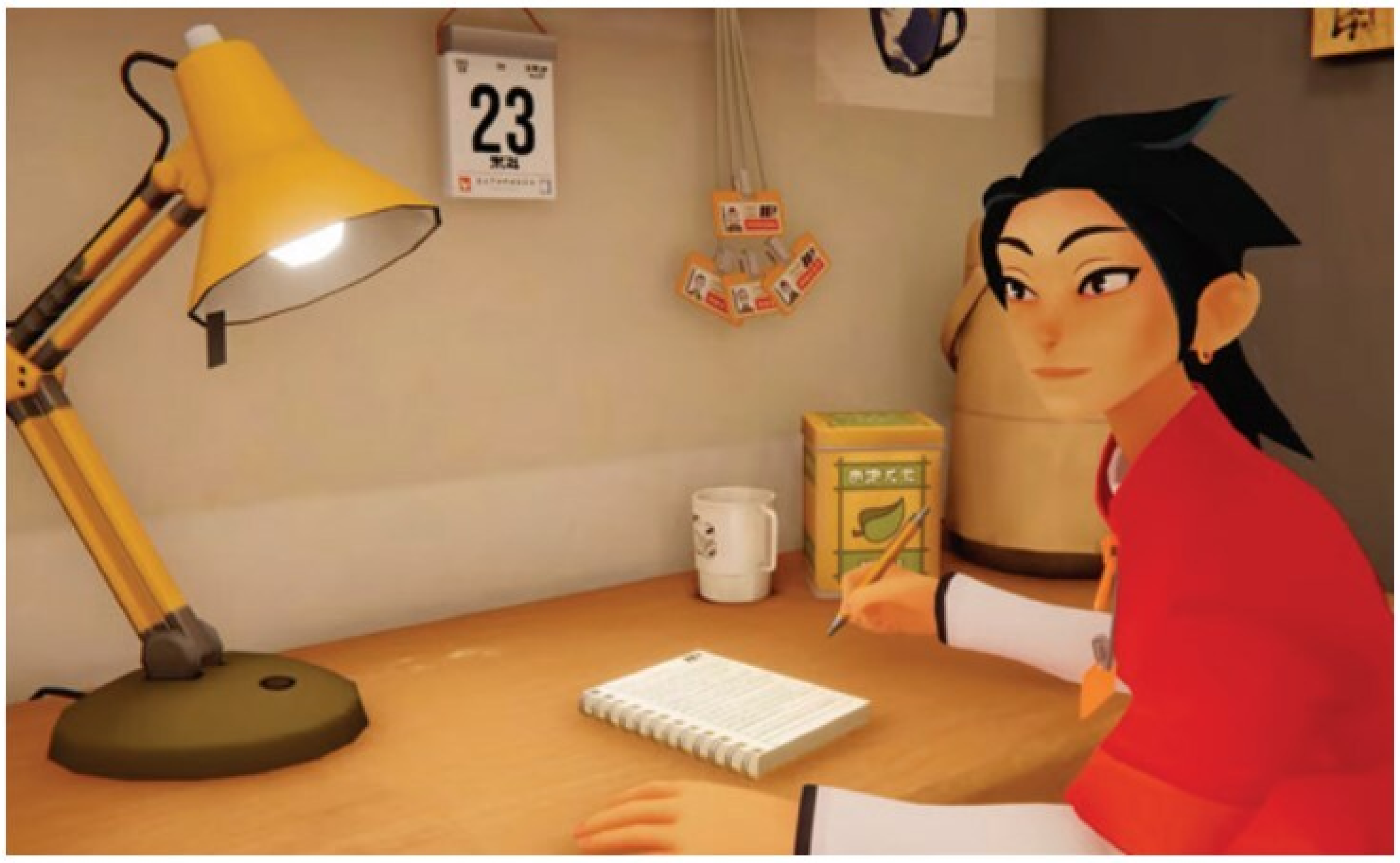
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER Private Division **DEVELOPER** Wētā Workshop **RELEASE** 2024



INKONBINI: ONE STORE. MANY STORIES

The joy of Japanese convenience





Two days after returning home from my vacation in Japan, Tokyo-based developer Nagai Industries Inc. released a trailer for its upcoming adventure game, InKonbini: One Store. Many Stories, and I was immediately taken back to my convenience store ("konbini" is Japanese for convenience stores, generally) adventures days prior. From Lawson's excellent spicy chicken to 7-Eleven's life-altering egg salad sandos, convenience stores in Japan are incredible, as strange as that is to write. InKonbini is a '90s love letter to the konbinis of Japan, and after speaking with Nagai Industries founder Dima Shen about InKonbini, I couldn't be more sold.

InKonbini puts players in the shoes of college student Makoto Hayakawa, who is taking a break from her studies to help her aunt run a small-town konbini. Nagai describes the game, due out on undetermined consoles and PC in 2025, as a "meditative narrative adventure/simulation game," where, while playing, you discover the joy and wonder hidden behind the daily routine of a konbini worker. The idea began as a "Summer Project," which is also the working title for InKonbini, between two friends. Shen's friend was planning to move to Argentina, giving them one last chance to work closely together, "so I offered him to try and make a game in the span of one summer." Today, Nagai has eight full-time employees and a few others working on the game.

Shen says their conversations led them to develop something "beautiful and cozy, with a positive mood, but also a bit sad," like mixing the works of Hayao Miyazaki and Makoto Shinkai. Shen tells me Japanese culture describes these mixed sentiments as mono-no-aware, which can be translated as "the sad beauty of mundane things." After several iterations, Nagai landed on the 1990s konbini, and Shen got goosebumps the second this idea was born. Those goosebumps might have also resulted from Shen remembering the bright and welcoming konbini of Shenmue, one of his all-time favorite games (Nagai Industries is the cover-up name for a Yakuza group in one of the game's locations).

Shen says Nagai aims to challenge and confront the notion that a developer can't convert this occupation into a meaningful and exciting gameplay experience. The game's trailer indicates InKonbini will have the kind of gameplay you'd expect in the shoes of a convenience store employee. But at the same time, Nagai expects players to find joy (and many other emotions) in the meta-gameplay born out of the other element of working at a konbini: talking to customers.

"The game is being built around a traditional Japanese concept of 'ichi-go, ichi-e,' which translates to 'one time, one meeting,'" Shen tells me. "No situation in our life can be repeated; we never get to experience the same thing twice, and that's what brings nostalgic flavor to some of our memories."

Makoto Kayakawa will only spend one week working behind the counter, but Nagai thinks the new connections she gains and the stories she hears will resonate with players. However, don't expect a mystery-driven plot or investigative narrative – InKonbini is about the joy of the seemingly mundane, although there is a connecting throughline.

Ultimately, Shen and Nagai hope players can recognize the power of slowing down in an otherwise fast-paced world, with Makoto Hayakawa standing in for us.

"The main takeaway wouldn't be a big revelation, though," Shen adds. "It's the journey that matters, not the destination. We simply want players to be reminded that all the moments of our life are fleeting, and even the things we get used to, like a convenience store around the corner, won't be here forever." **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PC (Consoles TBD) **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Nagai Industries Inc. **DEVELOPER** Nagai Industries Inc. **RELEASE** 2025

WINDBLOWN

A twister on a classic formula

Any conversation about great rogue-lites is incomplete without mentioning Dead Cells, the Castlevania-inspired game from developer Motion Twin. With its variety of biomes, massive armory of unlockable weapons, and breakneck combat, it's cemented itself as one of the best titles the genre has to offer. But after seven years of support, its development team is moving onto a new project that has the potential to be just as exciting: Windblown, an isometric rogue-lite with bright graphics and three-player co-op.

The game was revealed with a beautifully animated announcement trailer at last year's Game Awards ceremony, and while it showed brief snippets of gameplay, it left a lot to be desired. Recently, Motion Twin unveiled some new footage that gives fans a clearer look at what gameplay will actually be like. In addition to that, *Game Informer* had the chance to view about eight minutes of alpha footage behind closed doors to learn some more specific details about the game.

Windblown has at least three playable characters – known in this world as Leapers – but the trailer (and the alpha footage) both center mostly on the axolotl player. The most noticeable thing about the game, even in the very first combat encounter, is its speed. Our axolotl adventurer is constantly on the move, slashing at enemies, dashing away from their attacks, and speeding behind them for a backstab attack. Even between fights, when navigating the floating islands of the Vortex, players can dash at will, rapidly zipping across gaps.

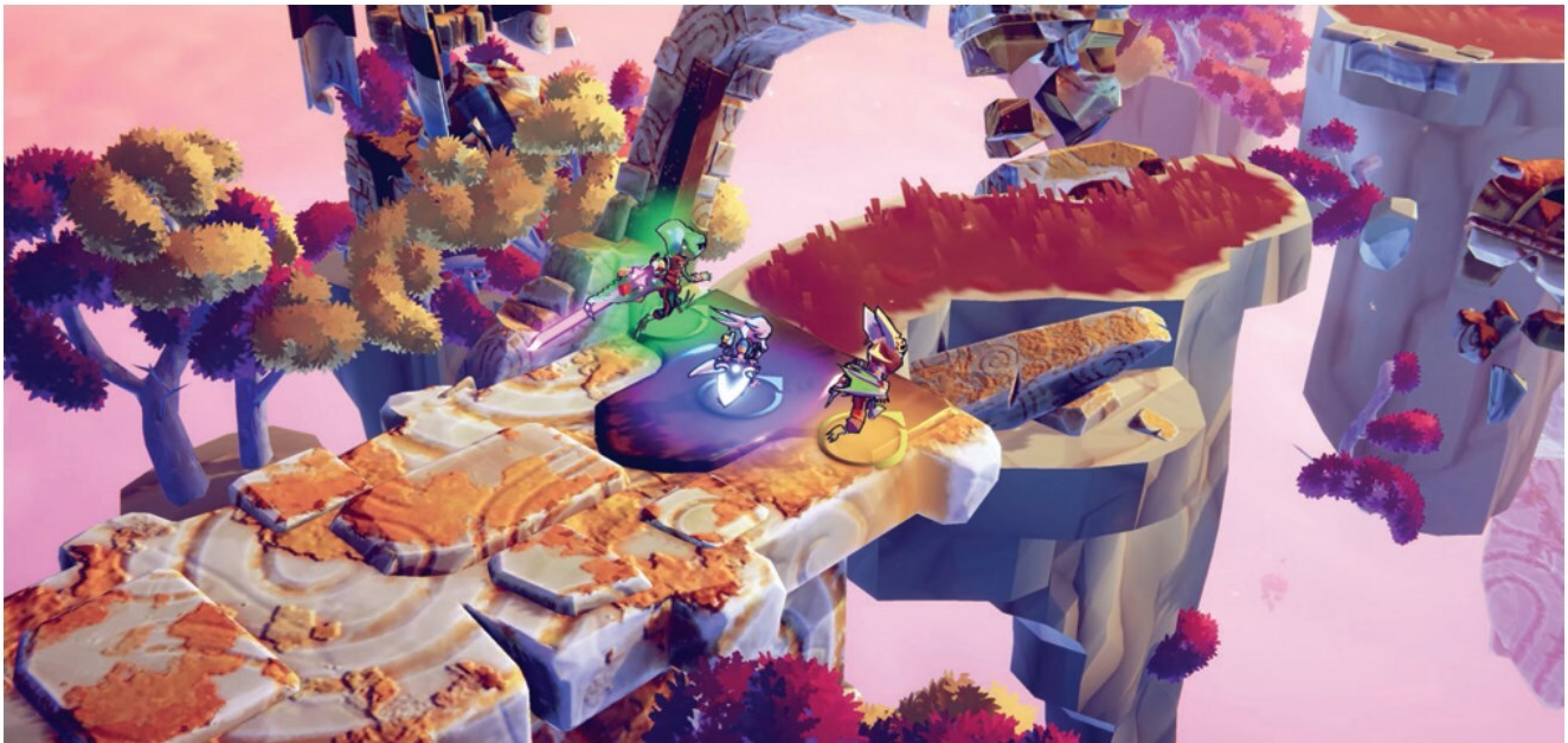
The Leaper in our demo footage is wielding the fish knife, a cleaver-like blade, but eventually picks up some kunai as well. Much like Dead Cells, Windblown will feature an array of unique weapons, which can be switched between in the heat of battle, but it takes this dual-wielding feature even further than its predecessor. By performing certain actions with one weapon, you can perform an Alterattack, scoring big damage with your other weapon. In our axolotl's case, using up all the kunai ammo enables them to trigger the Alterattack on the fish knife. If that doesn't finish your foe off, there are also powerful finishers called Crystallize attacks that do even more damage when synchronized with other players. It's cool to see the combat system encourage both weapon variety and player cooperation.

A variety of perks can also be found in your journey through the Vortex. Gifts offer passive benefits, like bonus backstab damage, boosted damage after dashing, or a homing arrow that triggers when you hit a foe. Trinkets are special bonus attacks, like bombs, slow-moving death orbs, or poison clouds. Meanwhile, collectible Fish have powerful abilities, like one that swallows and restrains foes, but you'll need to wait for their lengthy cooldowns to wear off before using them again.

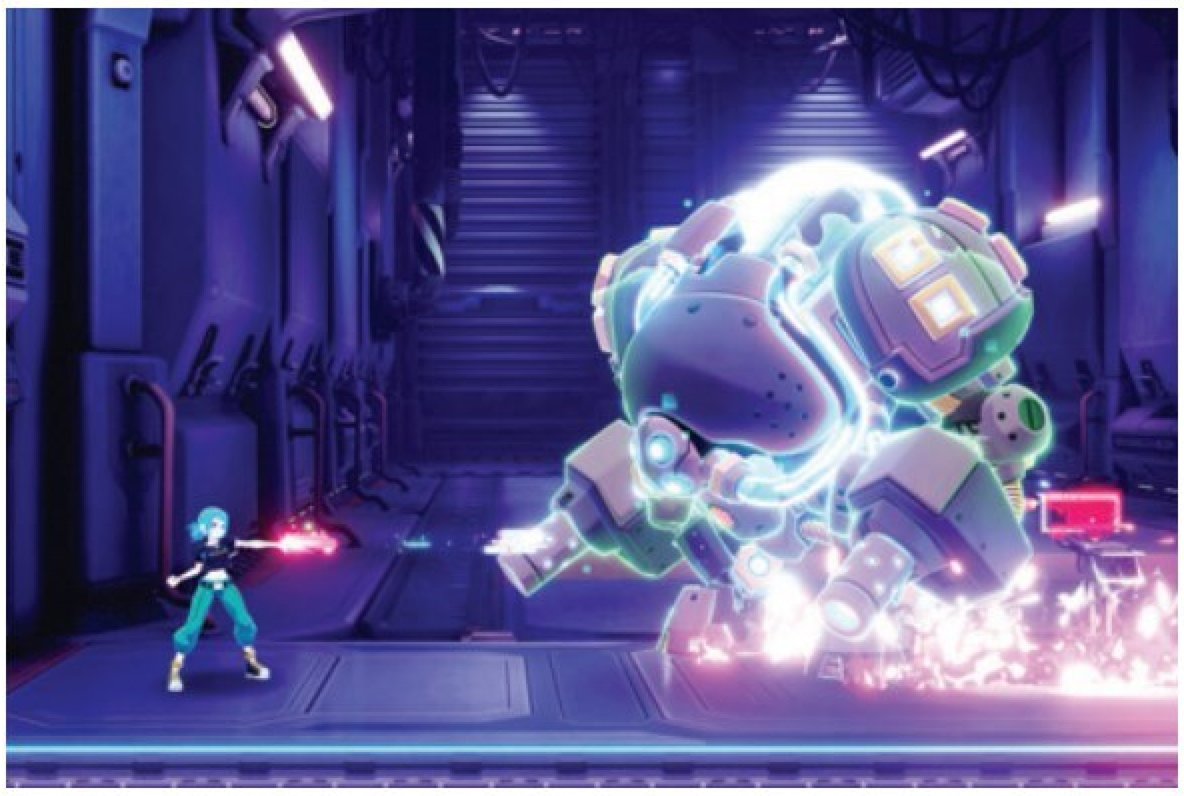
You'll need all these abilities, too, because the magical robot/constructs in Windblown look tough. Eventually, the demo player dies and is forced to return to the hub world, a grassy collection of islands called the Ark. It's home to some pleasant-looking NPCs, including an anthropomorphic Wolf who grants permanent upgrades. During the run, the Leaper also collected a souvenir for the heavy blade, so they can spend some money to unlock it for future runs.

While we haven't had a chance to go hands-on yet, Windblown looks great so far, like a vibrant mix between the design of Dead Cells and the combat of games like Hades. For those hoping to check it out soon, Motion Twin plans to put it in Early Access on Steam to use player feedback to shape the game. You'll be able to get your hands on it sometime later this year. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1 to 3-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Motion Twin
DEVELOPER Motion Twin **RELEASE** Early Access 2024



YARS RISING

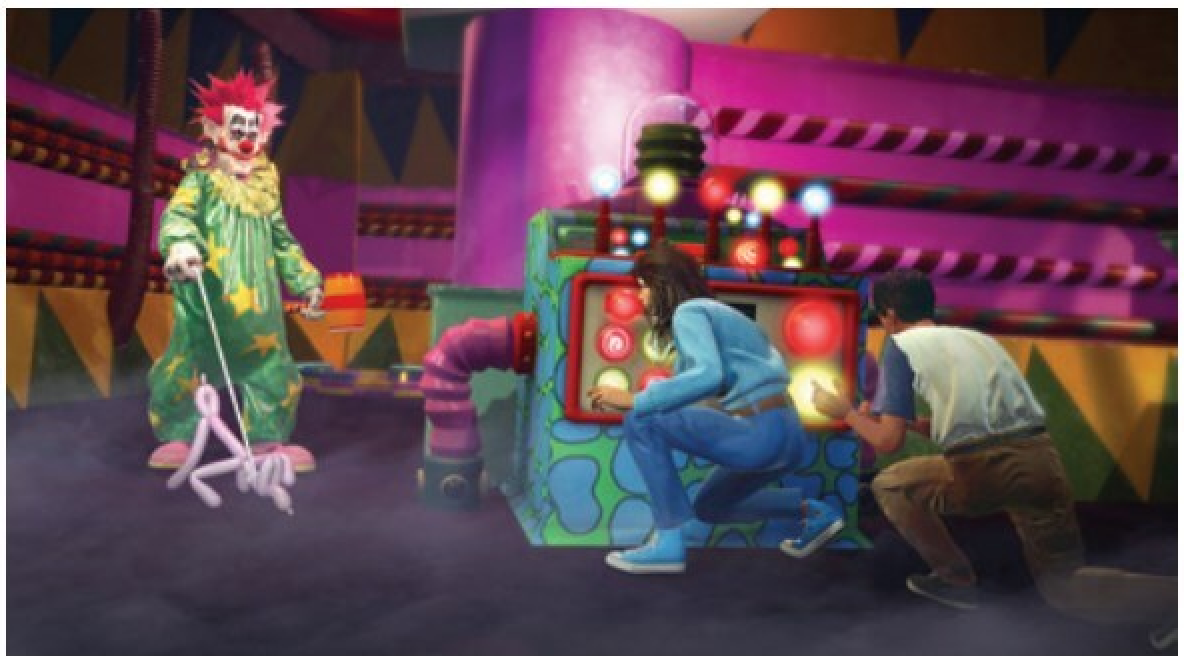


WayForward and Atari are teaming up for a 2D Metroidvania spin-off of the 1982 classic Yars' Revenge. This side-scrolling platformer stars Emi Kimura, a young hacker (using the handle of Yar) who gets embroiled in an intergalactic conspiracy centered around a corrupt corporation. Yar blasts robots, climbs platforms, sneaks through vents, hides in doorways, and more. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Atari **DEVELOPER** WayForward **RELEASE** 2024

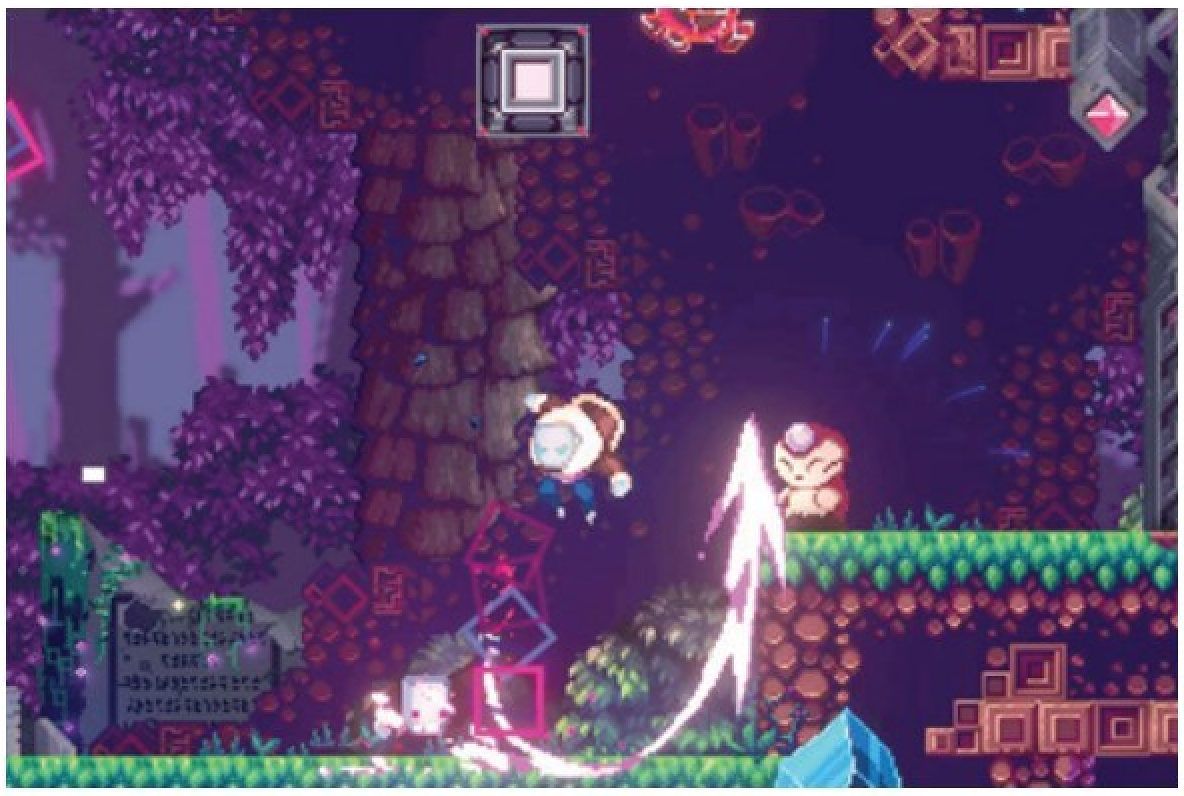
KILLER KLOWNS FROM OUTER SPACE

The teams behind Predator: Hunting Grounds and Ghostbusters: Sprits Unleashed is back with another licensed, asymmetrical multiplayer game. Based on the bizarre cult 1988 film, the game tasks seven humans with escaping from three titular Klowns. We played a few matches with the developer and its weird but welcome tone stood out to us the most. That and there are smart built-in mechanics for players who have successfully escaped to keep participating and help their friends. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 10-Player Online Action
PUBLISHER IllFonic Publishing **DEVELOPER** IllFonic, Teravision Games **RELEASE** June 4

LUCID

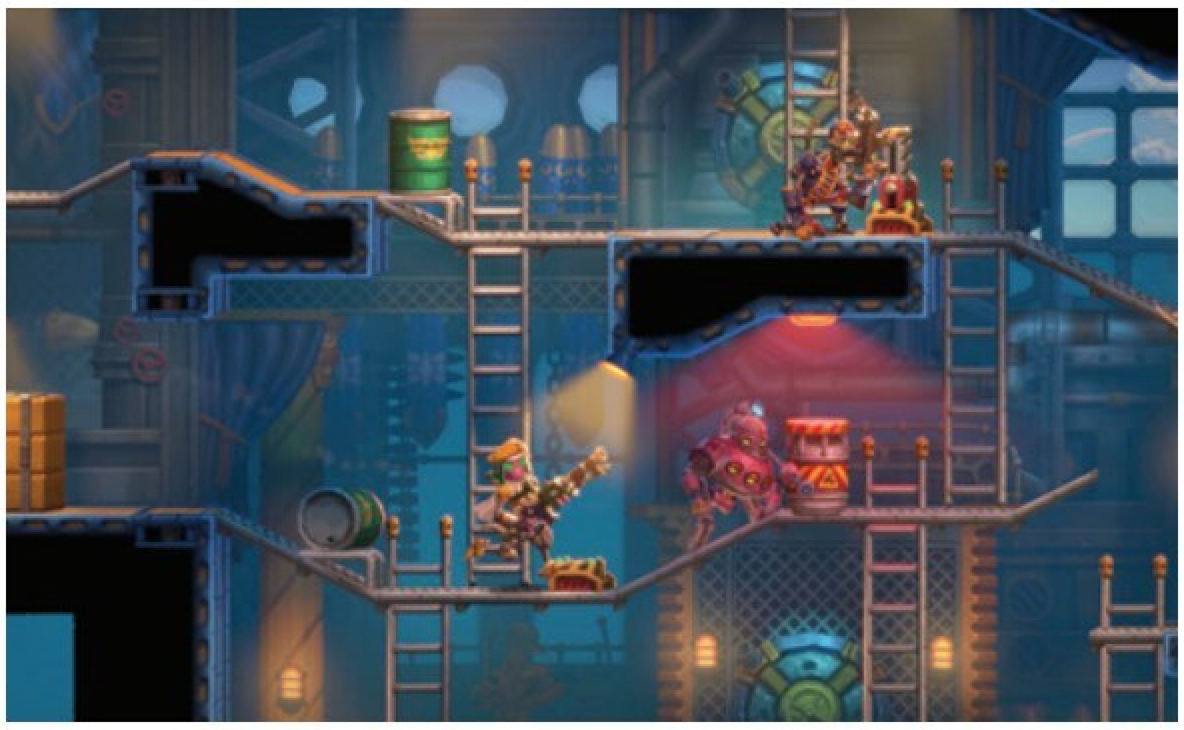


Lucid made such a good first impression that fans willed the 2D Metroidvania into existence via a successful crowdfunding campaign. Set in a "crystal-punk" world torn asunder, this beautiful pixel art game boasts tight platforming reminiscent of Celeste. Special attacks (dubbed Crystal Arts) let you defeat foes with either a blade, axe, or spear. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

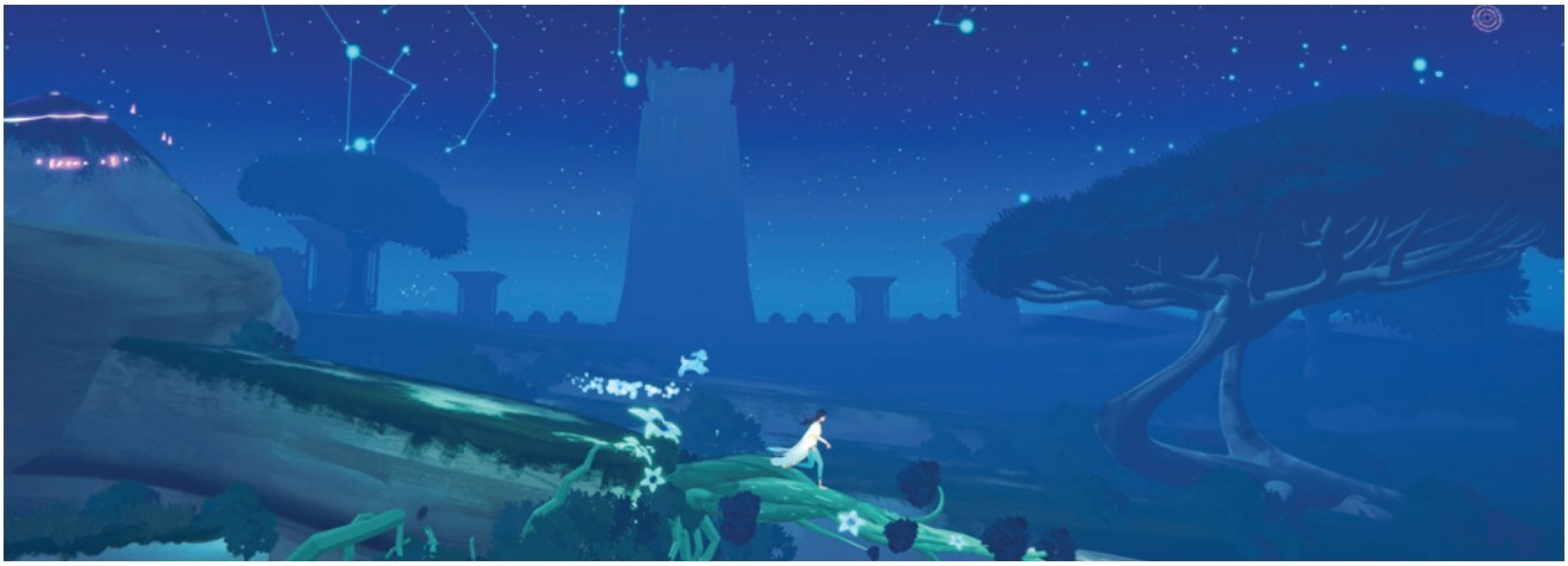
PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Apogee Entertainment
DEVELOPER The Matte Black Studio **RELEASE** TBA

STEAMWORLD HEIST II

This long-awaited follow-up takes its predecessor's steam-powered, turn-based action to the high seas. Sail the ocean to assemble a crew that can assume myriad roles thanks to a robust job system. The strategic battles now support free aiming to execute tricky ricochet shots, and you can earn your sea legs by engaging in real-time naval battles. **BY MARCUS STEWART**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Strategy **PUBLISHER** Thunderful Development **DEVELOPER**
Thunderful Publishing **RELEASE** August 8



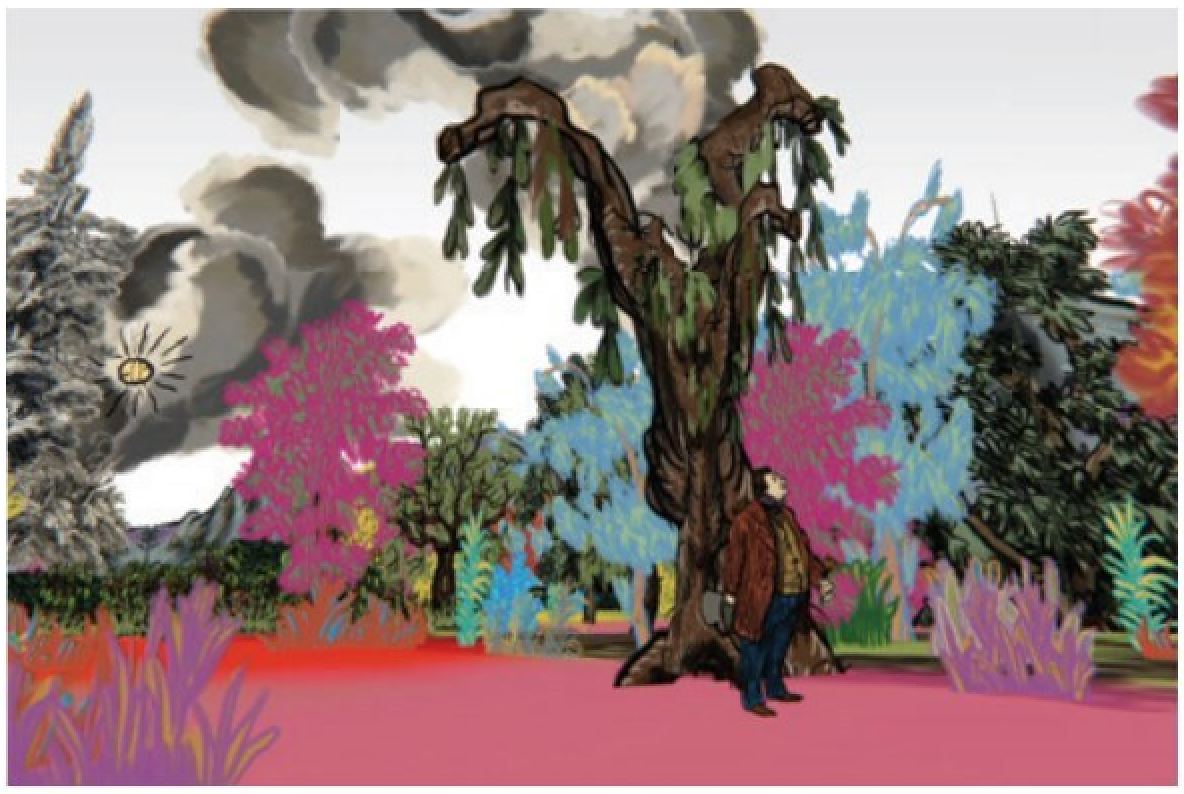
NIGHTSCAPE

This atmospheric 2.5D adventure draws inspiration from Arabian astronomy. The night sky has lost its constellations, and it's up to Layla and her spirit pal Goat Kid to locate and restore the gods behind these star formations. Each constellation grants Layla a special power, and she can repel threats with a bow while using a grappling hook to explore.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PC (Consoles TBD) **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Mezan Studios **DEVELOPER** Mezan Studios **RELEASE** TBA

SKETCHY FABLES

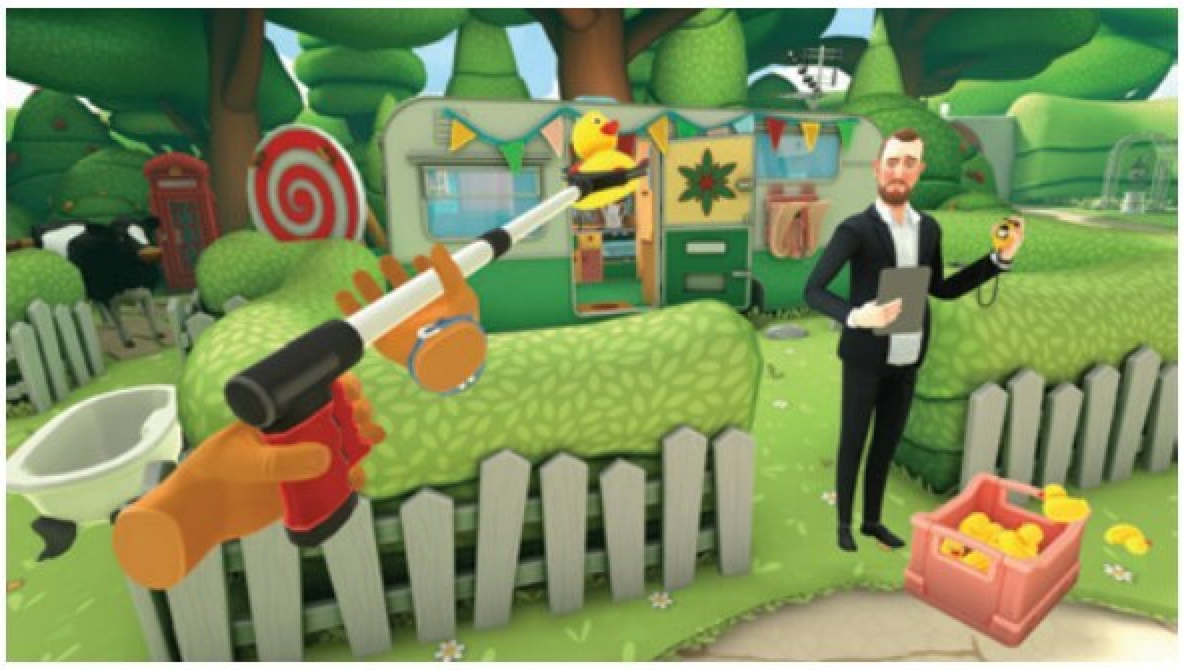


A first-person adventure assembled from over 10,000 hand-drawn artworks, Sketchy Fables follows a man exploring the child within himself. As you navigate the surreal dreamscape of his mind, strange interactions and discoveries prompt you to reflect on philosophical questions about the state of their innocence and inner playfulness. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Alle Jong
DEVELOPER Alle Jong **RELEASE** TBA

TASKMASTER VR

Taskmaster is a popular British TV show that is slowly sneaking its way into America that, quite simply, assigns comedians various tasks. It's a simple concept that frequently leads to hilarious results. I have become a recent superfan, which is why a VR video game adaptation caught my attention. The hosts of the show appear in the game, and players must perform tasks in VR. It will undoubtedly be ridiculous, and I hope at least almost as funny as the inspirational show. **BY KYLE HILLIARD** ■



PLATFORM PC • Meta Quest **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Draw & Code
DEVELOPER Scallywag Arcade **RELEASE** TBA

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GI MUST PLAY

STELLAR BLADE

More than a pretty face

Stellar Blade's opening minutes are an apt encapsulation of the game ahead. A beautifully rendered but confusing cinematic sets up big sci-fi stakes. A splashy character intro moment focuses on the lead character's sex appeal. A bombastic action sequence leads into a stylish and visually arresting boss battle. It's truth in advertising from the very start, and developer Shift Up seems to be making a statement in those opening minutes: This is what we're about – climb aboard, or jump ship – the choice is yours.

The extraordinarily versatile and rewarding action steals the show in the many hours ahead. Dedicated action gamers should have little trouble recognizing the apparent influences, from Nier: Automata and Bayonetta to the protective parrying of Soulslike games like Sekiro. Stellar Blade teeters back and forth between a fast-moving "stylish action" experience and a focus on enemy observation and tight timing windows for attack and defense. I found combat consistently challenging and exciting, with a steady curve of trickier enemies and bosses to balance against an impressive array of unlockable skills. Battle animations are smooth and varied, enemies are fascinating and grotesque, and the pace of any given fight has a film-like quality. It's great fun.

While combat is critical, other action and exploration experiences round things out. Platforming can be enjoyable, with thoughtfully hidden optional secrets to discover. The jumping sometimes feels floaty, and it's too easy to get caught on geometry in the environment, but it only rarely causes big problems. Other sequences, like grinding at high speed down a rollercoaster or slipping past a laser security grid, help to keep things fresh, if occasionally frustrating.

I enjoy the unusual pace and flow of the game, which gleefully meanders from linear strings of combat to moments of open-world side quest adventures and through brief excursions into horror-fueled infiltrations where your melee options are stripped away. Stellar Blade keeps the player guessing right up through a brutal sequence of final boss battles that aim to test everything you've learned so far. Even if there were times when things felt uneven, I was frequently just happy to be kept on my toes.

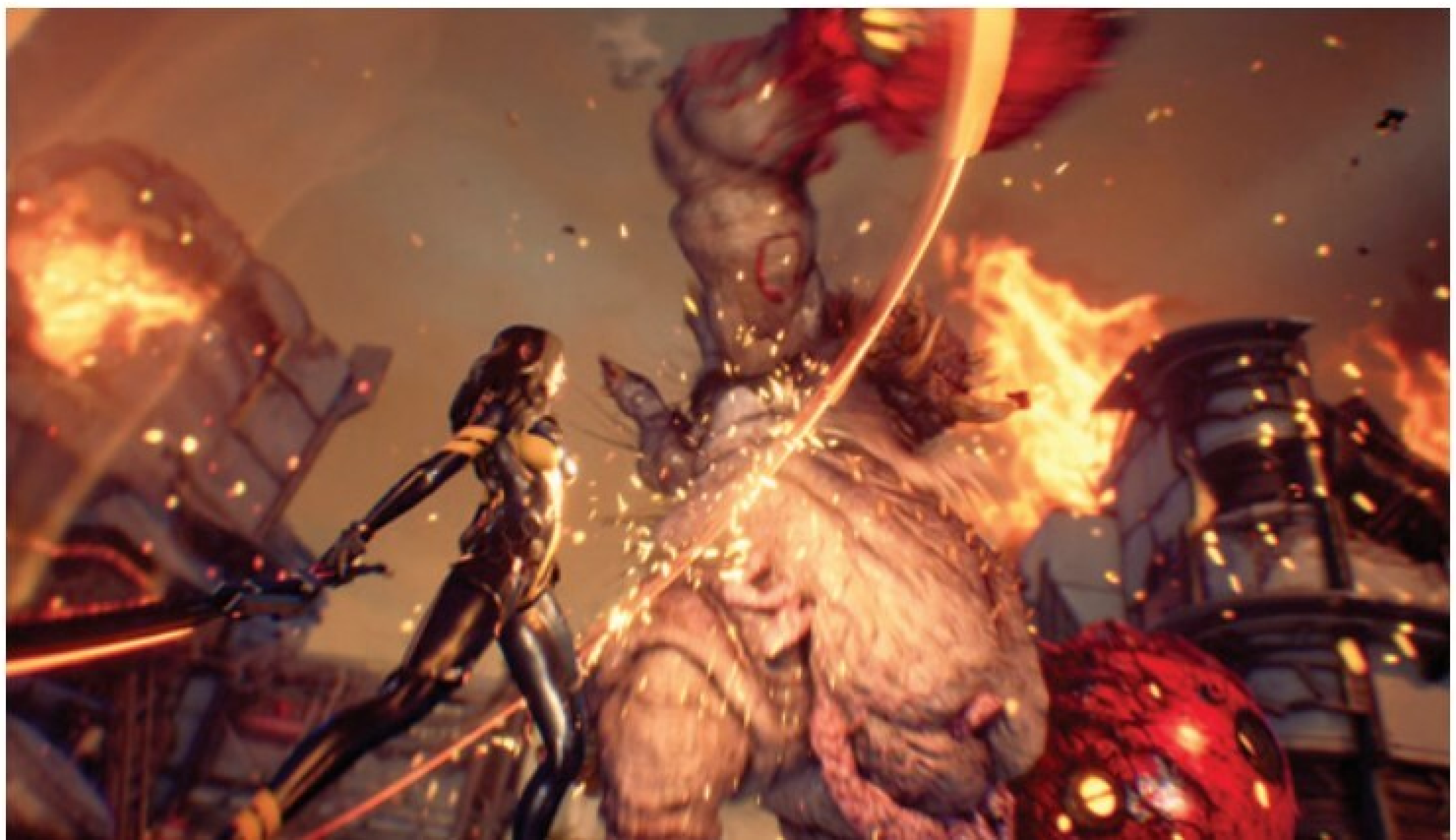
The high-concept science fiction tale is convoluted and predictable, and the dialogue often suffers from translation troubles or perhaps just a questionable starting structure. Even so, the grand scale of this post-apocalyptic setting is gorgeous, and I was happy enough to puzzle past awkward conversations just to see the next momentous setpiece or beautiful backdrop.

In shaping the game's style, Shift Up embraced a hyper-sexualized character lead, not to mention a similar treatment for virtually every other female character in the story. Eve is mostly a blank slate of a character, and it's disappointing that we see so little character development throughout her lengthy adventure. But on the visual front, there are plenty of ways to play dress-up with her hair, jewelry, and clothes. Increasingly skin-baring or fantasy-fulfilling costumes are chief rewards for exploration and quest completion. Camera angles for cinematics and big finishing moves are often provocative. Call it sex-positive or call it exploitative, but it's a notable thrust of the game's presentation, and players should know what they're getting into.

The further I played into Stellar Blade, the more it surprised me with the depth of its action and the breadth of play experiences. The story never clicked for me, but the world-building, top-notch art, and silky animation certainly did. Even when certain devastating bosses made me curse, it was always because I made a mistake and was left eager to dive back in for another shot. I loved the gradual mastery I developed as I explored its many interlocking systems of combos and special moves. Stellar Blade is unabashed in its titillating approach to sex and violence, but unlike so many games that use those appeals as a crutch, it's also a top-notch action experience that can easily stand with the big girls. **BY MATT MILLER**

8.75

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER Shift Up **RELEASE** April 26 **RATING** M



EIYUDEN CHRONICLE: HUNDRED HEROES

An old star rises

"Don't judge a book by its cover." A small child dressed as legally distinct Sailor Moon chirps this trite little phrase at me about an hour into Rabbit and Bear's Suikoden successor Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes. I'm not sure when I realized the adage applies to Hundred Heroes itself as much as it did to whatever the child was talking about. It might've been after I met a cleric whose vices included violence and foul language; but whenever it was, it encouraged me to overlook the misgivings Hundred Heroes' poor first impressions raised in me, and there were plenty. Hundred Heroes adheres a bit too closely to outdated design conventions, but the strength of its writing and characters makes up for its short-sightedness.

Rabbit and Bear were serious when it promised a modern Suikoden-like. You play as Nowa, a member of the Eltisweiss Watch mercenary corps devoted to keeping the peace. What starts as a piddling series of errands for nearby villages soon turns into something more serious as Nowa and the Watch get drawn into conflicts that threaten their beliefs and the entire world. Also, like Suikoden, Hundred Heroes divides its time between world exploration, where you pick up quests and new characters, battles, and dungeon crawling, the latter of which is basically an excuse for more battles.

Hundred Heroes also sticks pretty close to Suikoden 2's combat with a few refreshing expansions. Your team includes up to six active characters with skills you can augment with runes, which grant different abilities and buffs, and each character gets several rune slots that allow for extensive customization. The system is satisfying in itself but comes into its own once you start linking character attacks and forming unique combos.

As the name suggests, recruiting the game's 100-plus heroes plays a big role. Some join automatically, but the more interesting ones have a quest associated with them that gives a bit more insight into their personality and place in the world. They often play a minor role in the story after that, but their detailed sprite animations and voiced lines still make them feel like part of the story and not an afterthought.

The setup sounds too familiar, but despite writer Yoshitaka Murayama drawing clear inspiration from his previous works, Hundred Heroes never feels derivative and eventually surpasses its source material. It owes much of its personality to that strong cast of brilliantly written characters and a willingness to embrace humor and the ridiculous as a way to cut deeper with its serious themes of autonomy and equity.

They also save Hundred Heroes from itself. Slow traversal, an empty world map, and tedious dungeons make Hundred Heroes more frustrating than it should be, but the promise of a new character vignette or more plot advancement was always enough to keep me pressing forward.

Hundred Heroes expands on Suikoden's base-building feature with new guilds and groups for your party members to form. At a glance, that seems like busywork, and it is. But it also represents something deeper. Your castle is a microcosm of Hundred Heroes' themes, a small society of people who look, act, and think nothing alike but who respect each other and fight for the right to live freely, without hate.

In battle, a robust A.I. system lets you program commands and let your party deal with weaker enemies based on how you've customized their runes. Boss fights are just complex enough that they demand your full attention, though, thanks in some part to the gimmick feature. These live up to their name, for better and worse, such as making you guess where an enemy will move or forcing you to attack a specific object. They're a nice change of pace at first but quickly outstay their welcome.

Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes is a good reminder of why the RPG genre left some parts of its Golden Age behind. It's also a testimony to what makes the genre special and the power of good storytelling to move and inspire. Admittedly, rigid adherence to archaic structures makes those first impressions tough to look past, but a creative battle system, extensive party customization, and top-notch writing make up for the retro jank. **BY JOSH BROADWELL**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** 505 Games
DEVELOPER Rabbit and Bear **RELEASE** April 23 **RATING** E10+

SAND LAND

Devil's in the details

Sand Land is experiencing an oddly timed resurgence. Its creator, Akira Toriyama (*Dragon Ball*), recently passed away unexpectedly, effectively pointing a spotlight on his 24-year-old creation just as it was being adapted to film, anime, and a video game. The video game has been my entry point into this world with characters, vehicles, and architecture that all resemble Dragon Ball beyond even just an art style, and I enjoyed the opportunity to live in a brand-new Toriyama world and story. Other elements of the game, like its animation and performances, vacillate between high and low quality, but ultimately, Sand Land is the kind of experience I want from adaptation – the opportunity to spend time in a big, realized world with a story that pulls you all the way through.

The Sand Land video game functions as both a retelling and a sequel to the 2000 manga. For franchise newcomers like myself, this is a fantastic entry point, but there is a jarring line in the narrative between old and wholly new. Moving beyond the borders of the Sand Land region, on a basic level, doesn't make sense, considering the world built up to that point. But, overall, I like the plot and was locked in to see where it was going early on, even if the characters lack depth. Outside of the overt bad guys, no one learns much in Sand Land, and its characters are basically fully defined from their first line of dialogue.

As Beelzebub, son of the demon king Lucifer, you decide to assist a human in bringing water back to a dehydrated world. This entails exploring large, open worlds with a collection of vehicles that you can call at any time. Swapping between a tank for skirmishes and a motorcycle to speed across the dunes is a quick process, but you do it so often that I admit getting frustrated with the slightly cumbersome swapping system. I also didn't love that swapping between vehicles basically requires a full stop. It may sound like nitpicking, but every encounter in the game requires frequent vehicle swapping.

Fighting enemies using your collection of vehicles is a highlight and, understandably, the heart of the game. Despite the focus on vehicular combat, the action feels closer to a third-person shooter and does a good job passing control styles between disparate vehicles. Upgrading and customizing them is a slow process, and I rarely felt I was making big, impactful improvements by leveling up or swapping out vehicle parts, but I was always eager to check the garage and see what I could do to inch up my stats.

Sometimes, Beelzebub progresses without a vehicle, and these sections are generally annoying without ever being too difficult, thankfully. Beelzebub is a powerful demon with a literal garage of armored weapons in his back pocket but insists on occasionally sneaking around for interminable stealth sections. These parts of the game feel like they're from a different era of video games that we have left behind. The hand-to-hand combat scenarios aren't as bad, but I was always eager to be back in a tank.

Sand Land has its shortcomings and feels a little overlong despite seeing credits around the reasonable 20-hour mark, but it maintains a charm throughout. Toriyama's fun sense of humor is front and center with Beelzebub taking on the adventure primarily so his dad will give him an extra hour of video game time every day. I may not have had strong connections with most of the cast and was annoyed with a number of specific sections, but I liked spending time in Sand Land (and beyond) and seeing my garage upgrade and grow. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

7.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER ILCA **RELEASE** April 26 **RATING** T

TOPSPIN 2K25

A strong return

In the heyday of the tennis-sim video game genre, Top Spin and Virtua Tennis were the best players in the crowded space. However, in the time since the genre's boom settled, the offerings have fallen off considerably, with both franchises going more than a decade without a new release. TopSpin 2K25 signals the reemergence of the critically acclaimed series, and though it's been a while since it stepped on the court, it's evident the franchise hasn't lost its stroke.

TopSpin 2K25 faithfully recreates the high-speed chess game of real-world tennis. Positioning, spin, timing, and angles are critical to your success. For those unfamiliar with those fundamental tennis tenets, 2K25 does a superb job of onboarding players with TopSpin Academy, which covers everything from where you should stand to how to play different styles. Even as someone who played years of tennis in both real life and video games, I enjoyed going through the more advanced lessons to refamiliarize myself with the various strategies at play.

Once on the court, you learn how crucial those tactics are. The margin of error is extremely thin, as the difference between a winner down the baseline and a shot into the net is often a split-second on the new timing meter. This meter ensures you release the stroke button timed with when the ball is in the ideal striking position relative to your player. Mastering this is pivotal, as it not only improves your shot accuracy but also your power.

TopSpin 2K25 is at its best when you're in sustained rallies against an evenly-matched opponent. Getting off a strong serve to immediately put your opponent on the defensive, then trying to capitalize on their poor positioning as they struggle to claw back into the point effectively captures the thrill of the real-world game. I also love how distinct each play style feels in action; an offensive baseline player like Serena Williams presents different challenges than a serve-and-volleyer like John McEnroe.

You can hone your skills in one-off exhibition matches, but I spent most of my time in TopSpin 2K25 in MyCareer. Here, you create your player, with whom you'll train and climb the ranks. As you complete challenges and win matches, you raise your status, which opens new features like upgradeable coaches, equippable skills, and purchasable homes to alleviate the stamina drain from travel. Managing your stamina by sometimes resting is essential to sustain high-level play; pushing yourself too hard can even cause your player to suffer injuries that sideline you for months.

I loved most of my time in MyCareer, but some design decisions ruined the immersion. For example, I ignored portions of the career goals necessary to rank up my player for hours, so while I was in the top 10 global rankings, I was unable to participate in a Grand Slam because I was still at a lower status than my ranking would typically confer. And since repetition is the path to mastery, it's counterintuitive that repeated training minigames award fewer benefits, particularly since the mode as a whole is a repetitive loop of training, special events, and tournaments. Additionally, MyCareer shines a light on the shallow pool of licensed players on offer. Most of my matches were against created characters, even hours deep. 2K has promised free licensed pros in the post-launch phase, but for now, the game is missing multiple top players.

If you'd rather play against real opponents, you can show off your skills (and your created character) in multiple online modes. World Tour pits your created player against others across the globe in various tournaments and leaderboard challenges, while 2K Tour leverages the roster of licensed players with daily challenges to take on. Outside of minor connection hiccups, I had an enjoyable time tackling the challenges presented by other players online. However, World Tour's structure means that despite the game's best efforts, mismatches occur; it's no fun to play against a created character multiple levels higher than you.

TopSpin 2K25 aptly brings the beloved franchise back to center court, showing that not only does the series still have legs, but so does the sim-tennis genre as a whole. Though its modes are somewhat repetitive and it's missing several high-profile pros at launch, TopSpin 2K25 serves up a compelling package for tennis fans. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Sports (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER 2K **DEVELOPER** Hangar 13 **RELEASE** April 26 **RATING** E

TALES OF KENZERA: ZAU

Spirit over substance

In Tales of Kenzera: Zau, the debut game from Surgent Studios, the use of the word "Tales" is more literal than it initially seems. To kick off the events of the game, protagonist Zuberi reads a book written by his late father about a place called Kenzera. He uses fiction to cope with his grief, just as the player might do with the plot of the game, and as the studio founder, who lost his father as well, did when creating the story to begin with. While combat and map design in Tales of Kenzera falters at times, this strong, emotional core was what pulled me through to the credits.

Zau is the protagonist of Zuberi's book, and he's who the player controls for the vast majority of the roughly eight-hour game. After his father's passing, he goes to Kalunga, the god of death, to perform a risky exchange: defeating three great spirits to bring his father back to life. Kalunga, who simply appears as an older human man, accompanies Zau throughout his journey, providing wisdom and guidance to level Zau's often reckless behavior. It is a stellar dynamic, and I enjoyed watching them butt heads as they struggled to deal with the other grieving characters of the game.

Zau battles his way through the world of Kenzera using the Masks of the Sun and Moon, relics gifted to him when his father passed. The Mask of the Moon has more ranged options with ice abilities, while the Mask of the Sun is melee-focused with fire abilities, and both are fun to use. That said, later encounters with large crowds of enemies with regenerating health bars sometimes tested my love of the combat, with late-game combat encounters feeling like a chore purely based on how long they took.

The game is also rife with platforming challenges that make use of all your abilities gained up until that point in the story, but since you start with a double jump and a mid-air dash, movement is a blast from the start. Many challenges involve instant-kill spikes, which can be irritating, but quick respawn times generally keep me from pulling my hair out.

Tales of Kenzera's main flaw is its map and world designs, which turn a pretty good game into one that's uninteresting and unintuitive to explore. While most games obscure sections of the map until players explore them, Tales of Kenzera opens up an entire zone as soon as you enter a biome. There's no way to mark the map or see where you've previously visited, save for icons that mark collected items, so in some cases, it's actually more difficult to backtrack to find secrets.

The most frustrating element here is a specific set of secrets: Spirit Trials. Unlike most of the game's barely hidden elements, these combat challenges require the player to backtrack significantly and open an ability-gated area to proceed. I enjoy secrets, but there are only three Spirit Trials in the whole game, and they are the only way to upgrade your spirit bar and trinket slots, which are vital to Zau's abilities. It's a baffling choice to funnel both upgrades into one area and even more puzzling to hide them away like this, especially when their existence is not mentioned until you find one. When the player is neither implicitly nor explicitly incentivized to search for major upgrades, it creates a balance issue.

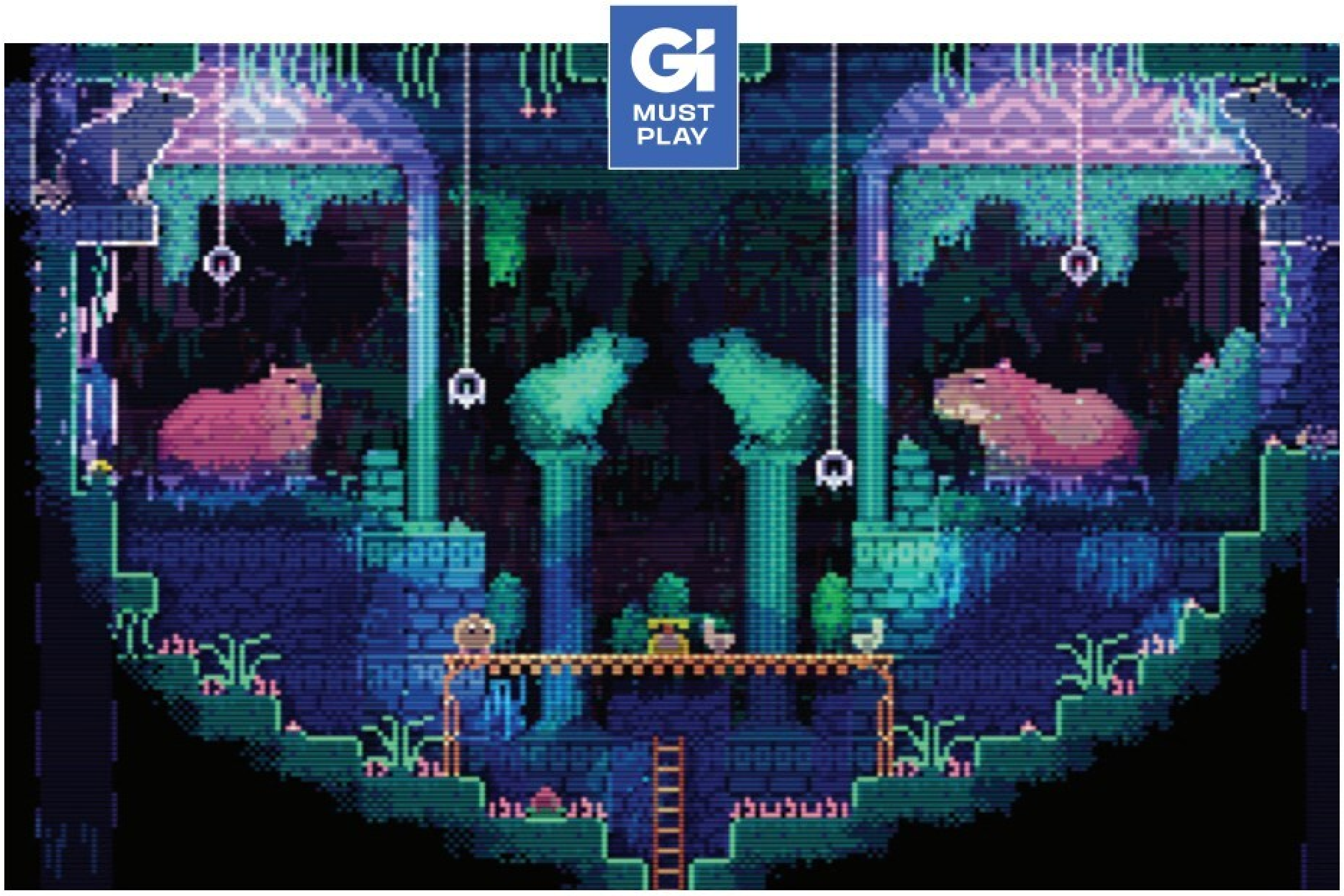
Despite my gripes with Spirit Trials and the map, I have a lot of respect for Tales of Kenzera: Zau, particularly in how it handles grief and self-reflection – it is one of the most thematically cohesive games I've ever played. It's just a shame the gameplay doesn't always match those highs, especially in a genre flooded with quality indies, because Zau's journey – and Zuberi's parallel journey – are stories I'll be thinking about for quite some time. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

7.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER EA **DEVELOPER** Surgent Studios
RELEASE April 23 **RATING** E10+

ANIMAL WELL

A masterclass in environmental design



Animal Well pleased, surprised, or scared me with something new at every turn as it confidently jumped from one idea to the next up until its conclusion. That novelty lost its luster near the end of its 8-to-10-hour runtime as I treaded the fresh sheen off familiar ground, but it never lost its lively, naturalistically wild heart – even when occasional difficulty spikes compounded that staleness. Still, its tense atmosphere is inherently compelling. Illuminated by dangling lanterns and brought to life with lovingly animated animals and Rube Goldberg-like puzzles but dimmed by an ominous synth tone reminiscent of *Twin Peaks*' haunting score, Animal Well establishes itself with a rare, masterful sense of place without missing a beat.

In Animal Well, you play as a little blob who must get home. Similar to other Metroidvania games like Super Metroid or Hollow Knight, your path is anything but linear; you must collect items and power-ups that unlock new abilities, which will open up new doors.

Starting as a powerless, adorable little blob became a distant memory as I added to my menagerie of movement-enhancing and puzzle-solving tools. These playful tools like a frisbee, bubble wand, yo-yo, or Slinky highlight Animal Well's madcap nature. Each tool has clever alternate uses that encouraged me to brush up against what I previously thought its barriers were in stimulating ways. Instead of awkwardly rubbing up against the seams of this Swiss Watch of a world, it felt like I was pulling a fast one on the creator Billy Basso – even though he was probably in on my scheme.

I first realized the multifaceted power these tools hold when I was fighting off one of Animal Well's ghosts after setting off some firecrackers to scare one out of a dark room. Normally, you can't check your map in the dark. But setting off these firecrackers suddenly lit up the room enough for me to check my map. These kinds of immersive touches add layers of flavor and liveliness to its world.

Stretching and going beyond what you thought was possible in Animal Well reveals a wealth of secrets and surprises, like the collectible Secret Eggs. Expanding your ovate arsenal opens up fast travel options and even more game-expanding trinkets. Basso's love for museums and architecture shines through in Animal Well's richly realized world. Furnished by bespoke landmarks like tile art murals of rabbits, statuettes of capybaras, and rats running in hamster wheels that power The Well's mystic mechanisms, these flourishes (sometimes literally) electrify each room.

It subtly balances the right amount of cheek into its surreal vibe, too. At one point, I found myself looking for the next corridor to spelunk. Assuming I'd at least find an egg, I hopped down a large pit. Hitting the ground with an unceremonious "thunk", I landed near three penguin-shaped shrubs I'd walked past minutes before. Landing at the decoration again after a fall, with the only way back up being a grueling climb, gave it meaning and life. I could feel its developers poking fun at my flightless avatar.

Animal Well hides its fangs in its main character's powerlessness: there's no fighting back against the bigger predators that chase you down. Usually, those moments highlight a clever approach to progression. But they sometimes dredge up its greatest flaw. Like many classics of the genre, the only checkpoints here are its save points. With only a handful scattered throughout the map, I spent much time revisiting rooms I've already explored top-to-bottom. This would be damning for a game with a worse sense of style, but the act of smelling Animal Well's roses is so sweet that it's nothing more than an inconvenience.

Teeming with life, secrets, and charm that surprise and delight, Animal Well held my full, undivided attention. Even in its most trying moments, it left a mark of endearment on me thanks to its absorbing soundscape, distinct yet familiar pixel-based art style, and flexible, mold-breaking approach to exploration. **BY CHARLIE WACHOLZ**

9

PLATFORM PS5 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Bigmode **DEVELOPER** Billy Basso, Shared Memory **RELEASE** May 9 **RATING** E

LITTLE KITTY, BIG CITY

Little Kitty, Big City's perfectly paced runtime, feline-forward mechanics, and engaging exploration coalesce into a reminder of why we love cats so much in the first place. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

8

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One
Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Double Dagger Studio
DEVELOPER Double Dagger Studio
RELEASE May 9 **RATING** E

ANOTHER CRAB'S TREASURE

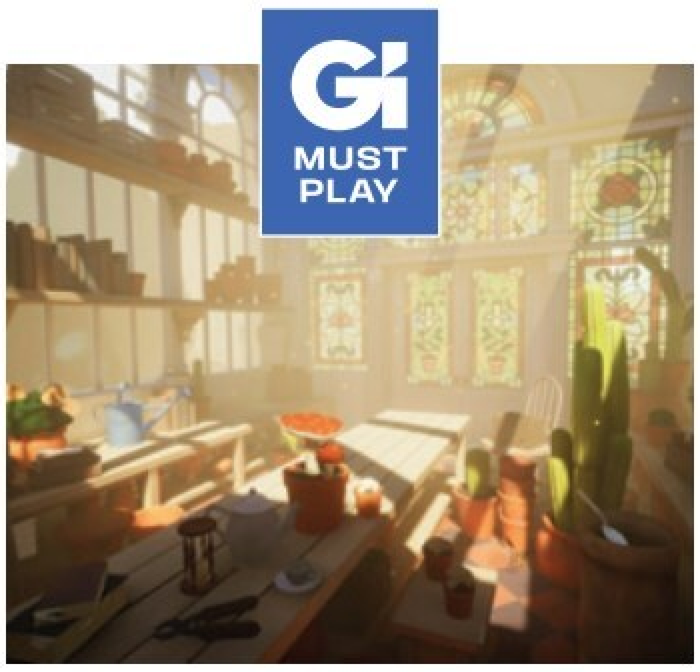
Though the combat, which falls between serviceable and irritating, threatened my enjoyment, I still found delight in the currents of Another Crab's Treasure.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

7

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Aggro Crab
DEVELOPER Aggro Crab **RELEASE** April 25
RATING T

BOTANY MANOR



Botany Manor is a blissful, smart, and creatively conceived puzzle adventure. It's just challenging enough to be engaging without veering into stressful territory, and its whimsical elements add fun, fantastical touches. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

8.75

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One
Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure/Puzzle
PUBLISHER Whitethorn Digital
DEVELOPER Balloon Studios
RELEASE April 9 **RATING** E

GI
MUST PLAY

CHILDREN OF THE SUN

Children of the Sun is a prime example of an experience born from a straightforward premise and then iterated for the right amount of time before it loses its charm. **BY DIEGO NICOLÁS ARGÜELLO**

9

PLATFORM PC
STYLE 1-Player Shooter/Puzzle
PUBLISHER Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER René Rother
RELEASE April 9 **RATING** NR

OPEN ROADS

While I didn't mind sitting shotgun as Opal and Tess had lighthearted debates over the semantics of trailer vs. mobile homes and reminisced about old flames, it's not a road trip that will stick with me for the long haul.

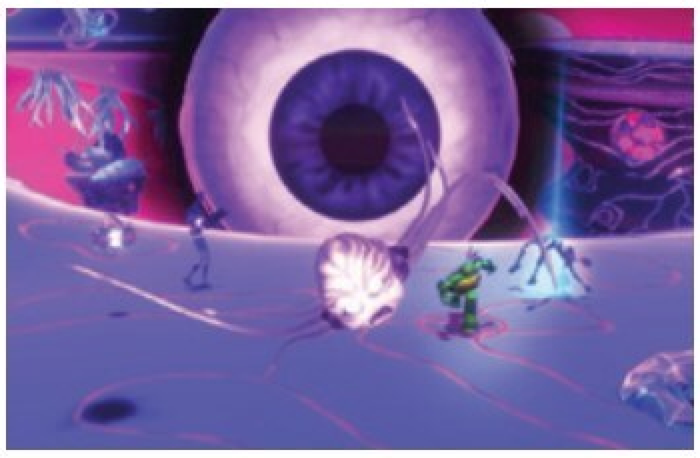
BY MARCUS STEWART

Liquid Gold
TESS'S STUFF

7

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Annapurna Interactive
DEVELOPER Open Roads Team
RELEASE March 28 **RATING** T

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES ARCADE: WRATH OF THE MUTANTS

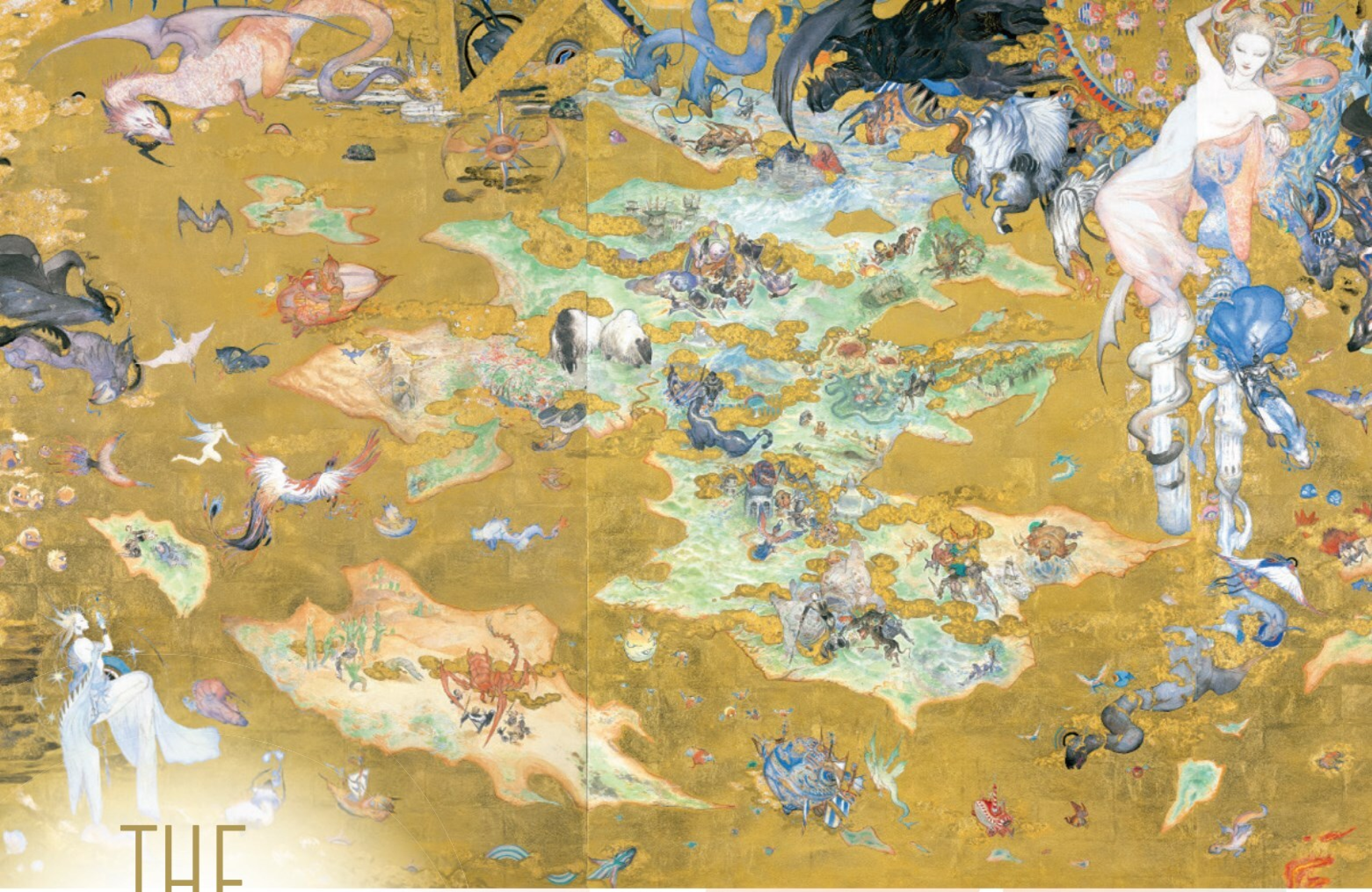


Thanks to uninteresting and annoying gameplay, repetitive enemy and boss encounters, and grating audio design, Wrath of the Mutants is little more than a shell of the series' glory years.

BY BRIAN SHEA ■

5.5

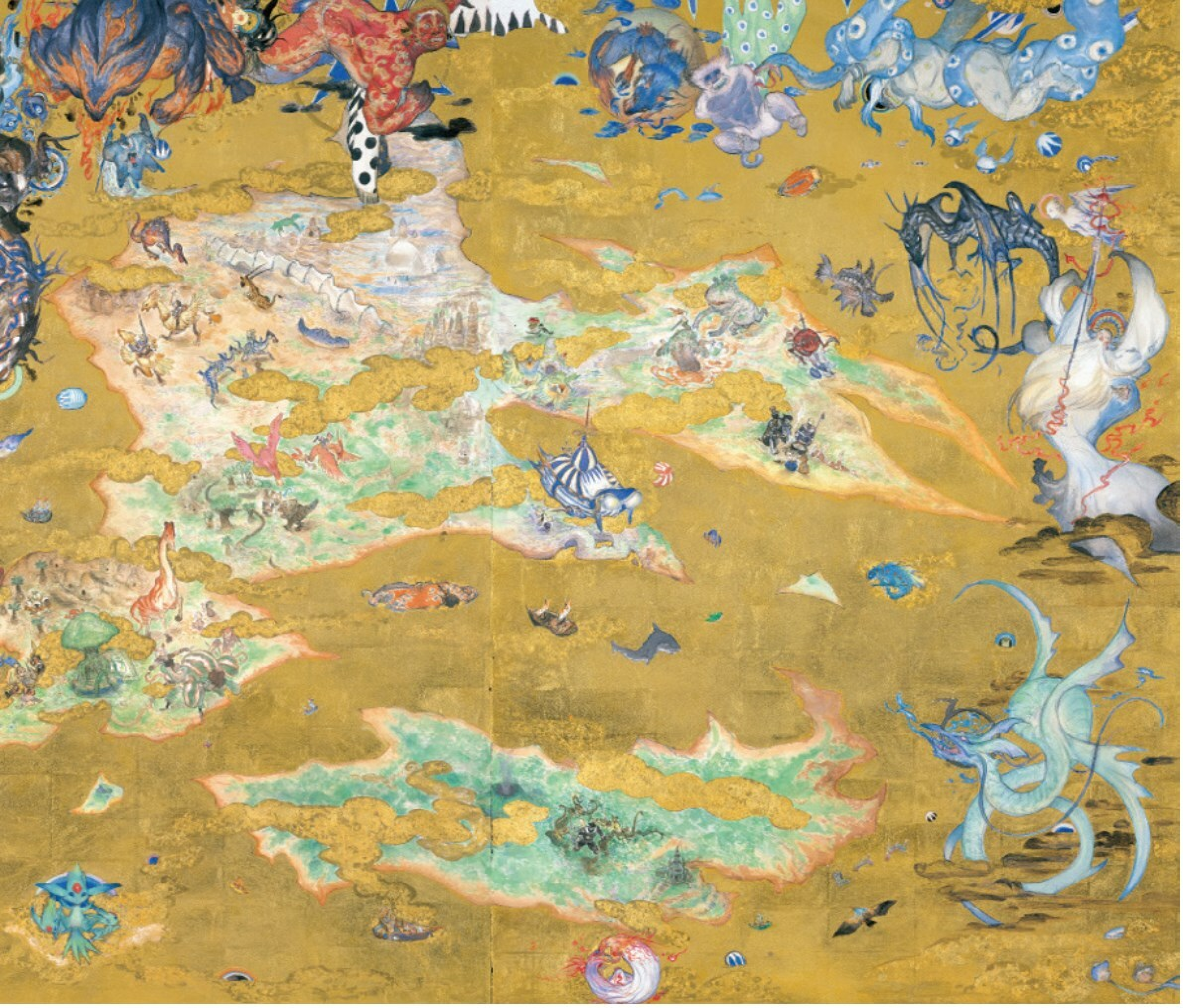
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Action
PUBLISHER GameMill Entertainment
DEVELOPER Cradle Games, Raw Thrills
RELEASE April 22 **RATING** E10+



THE CONTINUING LEGACY OF FINAL FANTASY XI

More than two decades since hitting shelves, the world of Final Fantasy XI still turns. For the people who have been there from the start, its familiar landscapes remain a second home

BY NOLAN GOOD



↖ Image Illustration: 2014, 2015, 2024 © Yoshitaka Amano

WHEN KOICHI ISHII WAS HAND-PICKED to direct Final Fantasy XI, he had not worked on the series for almost ten years. From 1987 to 1990, in the era when marquee role-playing games could go from original to number two in as many years, he had gotten his career off the ground with planning and graphics work on the original Final Fantasy and its follow-ups. By the turn of the millennium, he had distinguished himself with the Mana series and was reluctant to return to Final Fantasy even though Hironobu Sakaguchi, series creator, was asking him personally.

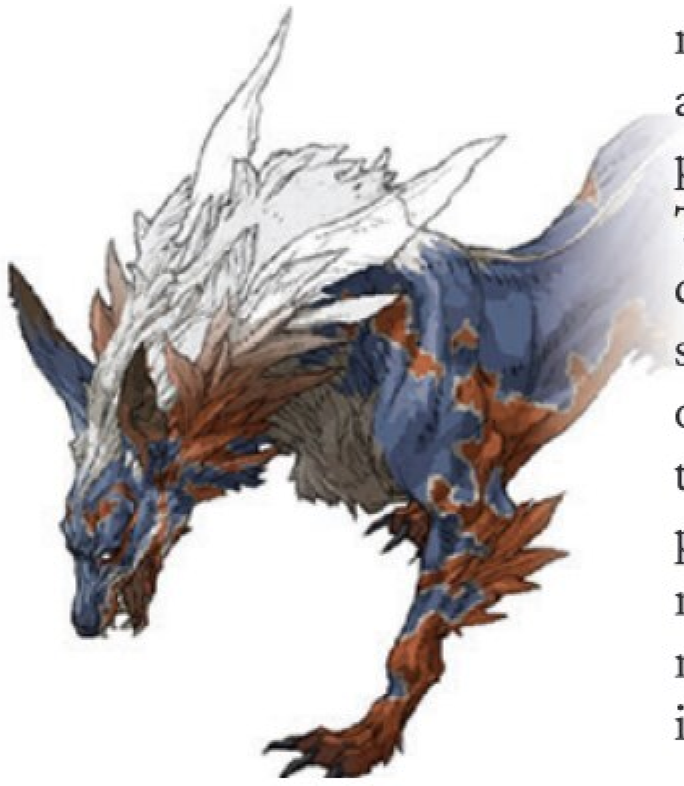
"I kept declining him for a while. But he insisted I give MMORPGs a try before making a final decision," said Ishii in a series of interviews with FFXI producer Akihiko Matsui. Ishii, regretful of having left the Mana team once before, refused Sakaguchi several times. "But Mr. Sakaguchi insisted, 'I'll prepare what you need to play EverQuest, so just give it a try. If you still refuse after trying it, I won't bring it up again,' so I had no choice but to play."

Decades on, he remembers noticing he could gaze up at the sky in EverQuest and watch as countless players roamed about in the shared space that, though virtual, felt real. He realized the project Sakaguchi was insistently pestering him to consider was a chance to achieve something he'd dreamed of for years. "It dawned on me: I could use this new technology to realize the fantasy world I'd always envisioned, something I'd wanted to do since FFI," said Ishii. "You could say I used FFXI to fulfill a personal creative desire: to bring a world to life."

When Yoshitaka Amano, illustrator and concept artist for the series, was brought on to start the process of bringing the world to life, he began with something unconventional. When Ishii came to visit for a meeting early in the development cycle, he found Amano with four massive sheets of paper laid out in the studio – a combined width of twelve feet. Amano was painting a world map. The final product, a sprawling and striking image depicting the geography of Vana'Diel intermixed with its fauna and mythological beings, references traditional Japanese illustrated scrolls and folding screens like the Rakuchu Rakugai-zu. Amano's art is always evocative in ways the games it informs cannot convey, but his map of Vana'Diel had a grandeur and subtlety unique even to his body of work. More than an illustration for a game, it seems to be a classical work plucked from the world of Final Fantasy itself. To Amano, who was overwhelmed by Ishii's vision and sense of place, it may as well have been.

"Drawing a world map of Vana'diel seemed like it'd be bringing an entire world to life," said Amano. "And while it could just be a presumptuous prediction, perhaps stories of Vana'diel will be retold hundreds of years later as some sort of legendary myth."

On the business side of things, matters were less romantic. The game was built for the PlayStation 2 and many on the development team did not expect it to last longer than the console's life cycle. The game, miraculously, remains online to this day. To its many players, new and old, its skies inspire the same wonder and instill the same sense of reality that EverQuest did all those years ago to Ishii. Vana'diel, no matter how many hardware peripherals and screens it passes through before reaching our senses, is very real. Brought to life not just by its passionate creators, but equally by its loyal players.



COMING TO VANA'DIEL

In Spring, 2004, the boy who would become Heghmoh, Galka warrior, feels his Nokia cell phone buzz with news from his brother. Final Fantasy XI, the game they'd been waiting for, finally arrived in the mail. He and his friend ran home to set up the game with its included hard drive disk and network adapter. "I was expecting to go home and play, start playing this game that I had been reading about for, you know, a year at that point," Heghmoh says. Like everyone else who set the game up that release night, he and his friends watched as the game installed for over four hours, chipper music looping all the while and burning itself into their brains. On a notepad, they brainstormed potential character names as the progress bar slowly crawled to completion.

"And then my brother's like, 'wait, hold on. I got it,'" Heghmoh says, "And he digs through our closet, comes out with this Klingon to English dictionary." Heghmoh. Klingon for fatal. "That's my beagle's name. It's been every character name that I've had in a video game."

Kurandoh, whose first video game was Final Fantasy VII, used pay from his first job in high school to get a PlayStation 2 bundled with FFXI and a hard drive. "Twenty years. It's the game I tried to quit and kept coming back to," Kurandoh says.

Seth, mid-twenties and experienced with the older FF titles, saw the future he had already been previewing with online games like SOCOM mixing with the console RPG in ads for FFXI. "This seemed like where games were going in the future," Seth says. "When it dropped for PlayStation 2, I went and got it... It literally took like, at least two days because there were so many people downloading."

For Brendan Finch, it was a few years later that he ran into an FFXI demo disc for the Xbox 360 port's beta tucked in a magazine while on a grocery run with his mom. He didn't know anything about the game he was downloading that night after convincing her to buy the magazine for him. He had never even played an online game. When it was later released properly, coincidentally on his birthday, the game cemented itself as a fixture in his life. Nearly 12,000 hours of playtime and close to two decades later it remains one of his favorite games of all time.

Every successful MMO thrives on its community, but fans of Final Fantasy XI are quick to tell anyone who asks that the world of Vana'diel felt different than anything available at the time. "The old Final Fantasy XI, in one word, is 'struggle,'" said Kurandoh, remembering the game's peak era prior to a slew of updates that modernized systems and sanded down some of the original release's friction. "It's a game about struggle. It's a game where you get punched in the mouth a lot."

By design, FFXI utilized difficulty and obfuscation to bring people together. At the beginning of the game, players are dropped into their starting city with no clear goal. No quest markers above heads, no NPCs approaching the player to onboard them into an epic tale. Just a world to explore with stories and grand undertakings waiting, somewhere, in the wings. The first few hours in Vana'diel are uncharacteristically slow for a Final Fantasy game: watch as porters carry boxes to and from loading bays and shops, guards make their rounds, and players run by to hit the market or buy supplies. It's unclear which of the many unmarked NPCs has a job for you or which of their vague bits of dialogue gestures at a thread for you to pick up elsewhere. The overwhelming bustle of the starting cities envelops one until they inevitably stumble upon the first breadcrumb of a larger story, no different at first glance from any side quest.

"It's the most realistic video game version of a [tabletop] roleplaying game. When you do something with World of Warcraft or Final Fantasy XIV, the game holds your hand," Seth says. "It tells you what you have to do and where you have to go. FFXI is not like that."

Even teleportation, a standard ability in Final Fantasy XIV and the main means of travel, is not easily come by in FFXI. Instead, it is only available to white mages. Need to get somewhere in a hurry? You either have to have a white mage in your party or find one in town willing to offer their services. You could, of course, make the trek on foot or via chocobo, but then you run the risk of dying en route, perhaps necessitating some traveling companions to assist in combat. If you need a safe place to pause and recover while traveling, you may end up at a camp where other players are doing the same. At every turn, FFXI pushed people together.

"Today's MMORPGs aim for convenience in every aspect, but the fantasy realm I envisioned may have been more like those of the past," Ishii said. "The harshness of the world was precisely why we sometimes worked with others and shared our joy with those around us. It filled me with joy to have been able to create and witness a world where people can honestly tell each other 'Congratulations!' when someone levels up."

Today, FFXI has been streamlined for solo play, and much of the harshness has been filed down to make up for a gradually declining player count.

"Leveling up a character could take years in real life time," said Kurandoh, referring to the game in its prime. "You were pretty much forced to play in six-man party groups with other players."

Some days, that meant getting unlucky when you couldn't find a group. "I remember getting home from school at 5 p.m. and putting up my 'searching for party' flag," Heghmoh says. "Sending messages to everybody I know that was in the game like 'Hey, do you have room for a warrior in your party? I could be there in ten minutes!' and just striking out and ending up... killing crawlers for three hours and then be like 'well, time to go to bed!'"

It also meant that when you did find someone to help you at a particular point, it was meaningful. "Around level 30, things start to slow down in [FFXI]. You get through the first few zones, and suddenly it's like things are taking much longer. It's that much harder to find a group," Heghmoh says. "There's a dungeon called Garlaige Citadel. It's a tomb that's kind of decrepit. It's fallen apart, filled with monsters, and people would go out and basically sit at the entrance to this dungeon and you'd wait for somebody – a party – to have a spot available. I met these two brothers – later in real life – I met them at the entrance to this dungeon." Heghmoh says, recalling how they started to talk while sitting outside the entrance in search of fellow adventurers. Twenty years later, they are still friends.

Finch remembers using the game's shout feature in chat for multiple real-life days to gather enough people to begin some late-game content. Because the experience of gathering a party and coordinating was such a time and effort-intensive task, the group Finch and co. formed ended up sticking together for months, long enough to play an entire expansion as a group.

"Just doing something in FFXI always felt like you were preparing for an adventure," Finch says. Knowledge and preparation were half the battle

when it came to higher-end content in the game. Missteps or forgotten essentials could mean the difference between a smooth operation and a frustrating embarrassment. "But at the same time, people were happy. You could, say, buy a stack of echo drops, and somebody would forget theirs, and you could go, 'Yeah, here's half my stack.' People would help each other like that all the time."

Heghmoh remembers carting his 13-inch CRT to his friend's house to play together on their PlayStation 2s, just like Seth remembers painstakingly connecting to dial-up to access the servers; Kurandoh still recalls the feeling of his horizons being broadened as a shy kid, suddenly orchestrating raids with new friends from South America, Europe, and far-flung parts of his own country; Finch recounts the way he and a friend repeatedly reset the game to match their servers for eight hours before finally getting the right one. All of them hold those early days close to their hearts, but FFXI is not just a memory to the players who continue to walk its fields and inhabit its towns. It remains a place they can return to.

"FFXI has always been, and this is kind of a stupid nostalgia-driven speech, but it has always been like a second home to me," Finch says. "It's like a place where I want to go. Where I could go, if I need to feel comfortable. I could pick any zone. I can just go sit in the zone, find a particular place where I want to sit and then just listen to the music for a while."

STILL HOLDING ON

Fans often joke that the first boss of the game is installing it. These days, FFXI is still tethered to its ancient launcher first rolled out for other Square Enix games in 1999. The assumption is that it can't be removed or changed without breaking something. Launching it is like unsealing a time capsule from the early 2000's. Lively music and airy, bright visuals bring you back to the era when user-interface design was about more than simple legibility. The chocobo-shaped cursor dances around the screen to highlight buttons that lead to social hubs long since turned into ghost towns, to screens that edit profile details nobody is likely to ever see. The shortcut to FFXI remains relevant, but everything else around it is just... still there. It is a microcosm of the modern-day FFXI experience: it feels as though it should no longer exist. It is, at a glance, clearly from a different time, but somehow still here. Inexplicably alive when its contemporaries have petered out into obscurity. The fact that actually logging in reveals the game world to be as alive and engaging as if one were stepping in two decades ago is a testament to the unique power contained in Vana'diel: that of a real world.

"I wanted to create that 'playful environment' from my grade school days," Ishii said. "The kind of activity-filled environment that begins from the question 'What should we do after school today?'"

And perhaps, in the future, after work. ■

ONE LAST THING

SUMMER GAMES SCHEDULE

It's time to lock in your summer and fall gaming plans with our handy checklist of the biggest titles being released in the next few months

JUNE

☐ Destiny 2: The Final Shape *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC) – 6/4*

☐ Killer Klowns From Outer Space: The Game *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 6/4*

☐ Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 6/14*

☐ #BLUD *(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 6/18*

☐ Still Wakes the Deep *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 6/18*

☐ Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC) – 6/21*

☐ Super Monkey Ball Banana Rumble *(Switch) – 6/25*

☐ Spy x Anya: Operation Memories *(PS5, PS4, Switch) – 6/28*

↙ Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree
↓ Destiny 2: The Final Shape

JULY

☐ Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, PC) – 7/2*

☐ The Legend of Heroes: Trails Through Daybreak *(PS5, PS4, Switch, PC) – 7/5*

☐ Cataclismo *(PC) – 7/16*

☐ Bō: Path of the Teal Lotus *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, Switch, PC) – 7/18*

☐ Frostpunk 2 *(PC) – 7/25*

AUGUST

☐ SteamWorld Heist II *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 8/8*

☐ Black Myth: Wukong *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 8/20*

☐ Dustborn *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC) – 8/20*

☐ Enotria: The Last Song *(PS5, PC) – 8/21*

☐ Monster Jam Showdown *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 8/29*

☐ Star Wars Outlaws *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 8/30*

SEPTEMBER

☐ S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chornobyl *(Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 9/5*

☐ Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine 2 *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 9/9*

☐ Slender: The Arrival *(PS VR2) – 9/13*

☐ Earth Defense Force: World Brothers 2 *(PS5, PS4, Switch) – 9/26*

OCTOBER

☐ Fantasy Life i: The Girl Who Steals Time *(Switch) – 10/10*

For a comprehensive list of upcoming releases, including games with release dates yet to be finalized, visit GameInformer.com/2024 ■

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